

SIXTY FOUR 2 NINETY FOUR

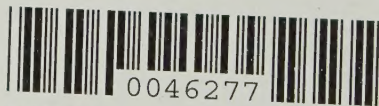
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Sixty-four, ninety-four!

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Sixty-Four, Ninety-Four!

SIXTY-FOUR, NINETY-FOUR!

By

RALPH HALE MOTTRAM

author of

THE SPANISH FARM

"Sixty-four, ninety-four—
He'll never go sick no more,
The poor beggar's dead,"



LINCOLN MACVEAGH

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TO YOUNG
MILLER BAKER
ON BIRTHDAY

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PREFACE

BOOKS about the war of 1914-1918 are supposed to require an apology. This one has only a reason. That war is only tolerable, as a memory, when one can feel that some one learned something from it. Otherwise it becomes a mere nightmare of Waste. How learn, except from books?—and books there are! Histories, necessarily official, memoirs, necessarily personal, novels, necessarily fiction . . . something of all, and yet something more than these is wanted.

And it seems as well for all of us whose experience of the War was not confined to one unit or place, to set down what can be remembered, before it becomes too dim—to set it down with the least official, personal or imaginative bias, so that perchance the record each makes may contain some of the Truth. In this way, before the generation of the War has passed, there may arise a real Cenotaph, a true War Memorial—a record, at which gazing, our children may be

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able to imagine a way of settling disputes more intelligent than maintaining, during years, a population as large as that of London, on an area as large as that of Wales, for the sole purpose of wholesale slaughter by machinery.

If we cannot provide the information which will make it possible to avoid this, and if those children of ours cannot use it, then indeed the Nightmare of Waste will visit us—more than a Nightmare, a reality in which our children, and with them the white civilization of Western Europe, may well disappear. And deservedly, for we shall have betrayed all those dead comrades of ours, rendered their willing sacrifice a ridiculous futility, and, by comparison with us, Judas will be shining white.

For this reason, this book had to be written.

One word as to the persons and scenes of this book and its predecessor, "The Spanish Farm." There were hundreds of Skenes and Earnshaws and Madeleines, dozens of farms called "L'Espagnole," fifty divisions known as Nth, fourteen "Umpteenth" Corps. If there lives to-day a man whose regimental number was 6494 I apologize to him. He is not intended. The sick call was variously blown and all sorts of words

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went to it. I hope he will let me use his number on this understanding. There was no appointment called "Clearance Officer," but the many men who did the job may substitute what name they like. In short, there is no futile, impertinent pen-photograph of anybody. There is, in the words of the writer of the preface to "The Spanish Farm," many a "composite portrait," good or bad, but always composite.

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Sixty-Four, Ninety-Four!

CHAPTER I

Sixty-Four, Ninety-Four!

IN the fine autumn weather that succeeded the Battle of Loos, the tenth battalion—a “Kitchener” or “New Army” battalion as it was then called—of a well-known English line regiment found itself in and around one of those big, four-sided farmhouses that the Spaniards used to build to protect their Netherland territory from the French. It stood just where the chalk downs of the Pas de Calais slope towards the Flemish plain. Its inhabitants spoke French or Flemish indiscriminately and were beginning to pick up a good bit of English.

The battalion, reduced to below two-thirds of its normal strength, was still large enough to fill the premises, the officers in the ground-floor living-rooms that looked out on the manure heap, two companies in the great barns and stables that spread at right-angles to the house; beyond the remains of the moat, an oblong duckpond

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filling the fourth side of the square, stretched a further yard, with cartsheds and hop-presses. Another company and a half were close by. Spanning the moat was a red-brick bridge commanded by an old loop-holed short tower, now granary and pigeon-loft in its successive storeys. Against it stood the dome-shaped kennel of the old yard dog. The ridge of the thatched roof of the dwelling-house was tasselled with wall-flowers in a brown fringe. The mellowed brickwork of the front, between the low eaves and the widespreading, bluish-green shutters, was bolted by old iron bolts, whose heads were worked into the date 1610. Before the house was a ten-acre pasture, surrounded by a double row of Holland elms, with an avenue that led to the road. Behind was a smaller pasture. Westward against the skyline were the downs beyond St. Omer, and northward the gravelly hillocks that connect them with rolling country between Ypres and Courtrai. The enemy were twenty kilometres east by south, away down the Lys valley toward Lille and the Bethune coalfields. Over all hung the heavy, moist, fertile beauty of a Flemish autumn; root-crops knee-deep, hopfields turning russet. When the sentry on the gate was changed at six, the

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close mist still clung between the trees of the avenue, about the buildings, and above the moat. "Revelly" seemed to dissipate the thickness of the atmosphere, but what it really did was to make the emptiness of the meadows alive with khaki figures—little strings of men going, section by section, through roll-call and kit inspection, while the Adjutant, a small wiry infantry officer, once the familiar figure in all photos of a celebrated polo team, passed between the groups with the Regimental Sergeant-major, trying to gauge how far the loss and disorganization of Loos had gone. A keen man, this Captain Hunter, the Adjutant. He had retired a year or two before 1914 from a profession by which he set more store than was supposed by many people, who mistook him for a mere idle polo-player. He had rejoined at once and become the only ex-regular officer of one of the New Army battalions. It was clothed in blue serge and unarmed, and commanded by a motherly old ex-Territorial Colonel, who had recruited it; but it was composed, as his instinct soon told him, of material such as regular English officers only know in dreams, if ever they have any. Working on this material with the military knowledge gained in South Africa, and

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a good deal of practical skill and tact, he had brought them to a very fair state, by the time they had been ordered to France and involved in Loos. Emerging from that somewhat catastrophic experience, Captain Hunter, never theoretic or abstract, had grasped at once the immediate necessity—reorganize—refit—retrain even, and—have another go. Moving among the busy groups on the extemporized parade-ground of the home pasture, throwing questions at the Sergeant-major, he did not forget to look at the weather, the country, the farmhouse; or listen to the distant rumble of gunfire along the front, the hum of a threshing machine, and the “Hue!” of old Vanderlynden, the farmer, beyond the hedge, ploughing with a white jennet and a great Boulonnais horse, harnessed to what looked like a garden hoe fastened to the chassis of a perambulator. “Extraordinary people,” thought Captain Hunter, “can’t leave the stubble alone five minutes. No wonder they’ve no sport!”

Having seen enough to make him ponder, he dismissed the Sergeant-major with the necessary orders, and went back towards the house. The brisk Doctor was standing there “at gaze,” with his orderly, a heavily-built chemist’s assistant,

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"pointing" beside his officer like a well-bred dog.

"Mornin', Doctor!"

"Mornin'. Can I have a fatigue of ten men?"

The Adjutant winced. "You'll have to have it if you must, Doctor, though the Colonel . . ."

"Must is the word! Do you know what a sick parade I've got? Eighty! Yes, I have. It's trench fever—insides all inside-out and temperature like—well, some'll have to go down to base. Meanwhile I want to isolate the others and try and pull 'em through. I want that shed and I want it empty."

The Doctor pointed to a long low extension of the farm buildings that ran out from the back of the dwelling-house to the grassy dip of the dry moat. The door was barred and padlocked.

"*'Privée—entrée interdite.'* Does that mean we mustn't go in?"

"That's it!" (the Adjutant was guessing).

"It's full of marsh hay, isn't it?" He peeped through a chink.

"Flax, man, flax! I'll use it for bedding when it's spread, then we shan't need to ask for straw and be told we can't have it."

Having sent the necessary instructions by the orderly, the two entered the house from the

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back, past pig-swill carried in pails and a separator humming like an aeroplane. Coming round the corner of a high oak partition, they entered the mess extemporized in the front parlour, and were greeted by that national password, "Morn-in'." It came from Colonel Gilford, their commanding officer, who was seated before that plate of eggs and bacon which it would have taken more than a German Army to prevent his servant from providing, done to a turn, and served fresh and hot. Born in and bred up for the Army, inheriting just enough gentility of blood and security of income to be unconscious of either, of Art, Religion, Science, Business and Politics, Colonel Gilford knew nothing and cared less. During twenty-two years' service he had seen six weeks of actual fighting, all of it against black men or Asiatics; there was not a sport at which he did not excel; and his physical courage—at once an instinct and a creed, and his belief in himself—as complete as most men's in God—were masked by an expressionless good-fellowship towards the few people he considered his fellows. He had been ordered to command and take to France a battalion of the New Armies, in which Captain Hunter and one or two N.C.O.s were

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the only regular soldiers. Face to face with an enemy of whose language he did not understand a word, and whose theory of International Relationships, military training and general conduct would have been quite beyond his comprehension, his bearing did him and his kind every credit. He went into the Battle of Loos, ostensibly an experienced veteran, really as strange to the new conditions as the mechanics, clerks and labourers of which his battalion was composed. The Kotal campaign of 1900 gave him no hint of what to do in the face of machine-gun and heavy-artillery fire, such as he had never conceived possible. In spite of all this, through three days and nights, sleepless and practically foodless, he had carried out such orders as had reached him, held on in the absence of orders, and when finally relieved by the arrival of another unit, had gathered together what remained of his men, whole platoons of whom were missing, withdrawn them, entrained them, and established them in an entirely new sector. And now he was billeted in a farmhouse whose inhabitants spoke a tongue which the Adjutant thought was Cape Dutch.

He had slept soundly, awakened fresh; had bathed, shaved and appeared at breakfast among

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the remaining officers of his battalion. In those early days Colonel Gilford still maintained the peace-time taboo of "No shop in the Mess." The conversation was therefore restricted to the weather. It was impossible to discuss the English papers, which contained accounts of the "victory" of Loos, from which the battalion had with such difficulty emerged. In the silence, only broken by the sound of hearty eating, the noise of a dispute, carried on outside the window, forced itself on every one's attention. Colonel Gilford, who expected his marmalade to be allowed to subside in peace, before he drifted on in decency and comfort to the necessary business of the day, raised his eyebrows. Whereon the Adjutant rose from his seat and passed outside.

The argument was between old Jerome Vanderlynden, the farmer, and Adams, the Quartermaster, the one slightly bowed in deprecation and clasping his cap to his stomach, the other stiff and square in worn khaki with the long-service ribbon at the breast.

The one was speaking Flemish and the other Lancashire.

"They have burnt my hop-holes for kindling, they have grazed their horses in my pasture, and

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now they turn my agricultural implements out of my shed, to leave them in the open air all night, so that they rust. . . .”

“Get out, you dirty native! I’ve twenty years’ service to my name; I can’t understand a word you say: it’s no business of mine; go and talk to the Adjutant, Transport Officer, Chaplain, Brigade Interpreter. I gave you sugar and butter in exchange for the coffee. . . .”

The Adjutant broke in. “What is it, Adams? Grousing again? *Qu’est que c’est*, Mossoo? Devil take their jargon!” He went back into the Mess: “Does anyone speak French? Oh, good. You do! Well, when you’ve finished your breakfast, you might see what he wants.”

The officer addressed rose from the lower end of the table and went out to where Vanderlynden, the farmer, relinquished by old Adams, was still turning over and over in his hands that high-crowned cap with glazed peak, so much more Dutch than French.

This young officer, by name Geoffrey Skene, had not been with the battalion twelve hours, and regarded himself as one of the most fortunate men on earth. A few hours ago he had been prey to a dreadful fear—lest the victory of Loos

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should end the War, without his ever having fired a shot. . . . And suddenly his orders had come, and with a beating heart he had left the reinforcement camp at Etaples, to join a battalion he had never seen. By chance in the only other occupant of his railway carriage he had found a man called Earnshaw he had known slightly in England. They were both bound for the same unit—perhaps the first of the depleted regiments to be hauled out of the line and given a chance to fill up; and there sprang up between them one of those quick intimacies of the early days, before everyone became bored and bewildered. Skene and this Earnshaw had seemed to have much in common: both of them had gone in the first rush of Kitchener recruits to those public meetings at which men shoved and fought for attestation papers, which often could not be supplied for days. To Skene this had happened in the country-market-cathedral-garrison town where he had lived nearly all his life. To Earnshaw it had happened in the dark busy heart of Manchester, where he was staying in the Imperial, just home, “fed up” with Canada. Their experiences had been almost identical. With incredible difficulty they had succeeded in becoming

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members of that herd of men, tens of thousands, inhabiting the wooden town of Shoreham, the vast camp of Black Down, or scores of similar places. There, dressed in blue, unarmed but very healthy, all through the winter of 1914 they had drilled and drilled, with dummy rifles, without rifles, heard lectures, laughed at the Army routine, been happy because they were "*learning to fight*." They wished to fight—Skene because he saw in some confused way the Belfry of Bruges, the iron clock of Malines, the streets of Louvain, battered or burning, with a generous feeling in his heart of: "Look here, you know, this must be stopped"; Earnshaw because all over the world he had found "dam" Germans. Exactly why or how they were "dam" he could not have explained, but he was just clear that the chance of a lifetime had come to "larn" them. The will to fight, and the business of learning how, had filled the winter nicely. At times Earnshaw was rebellious. He had half-a-dozen shot guns and sporting rifles at home, and laughed at the old long Lee-Enfield; he was appeased by being put into the transport section, where he groomed riding horses and was promised mules later. He had "used" mules (no one ever spoke of "riding" or

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“driving” mules, but always of “using” them) in two continents, and the thought cheered him. It was something he could *do*. Skene, an architect, fancied that he knew something about plans, that trenches were not unlike the foundations of houses, that he had experience of cements and ways of riveting that might be useful. He was appeased by being put to dig mile after mile of trenches that were only holes in the earth. Both earned their third stripe by Christmas.

Spring had come—Neuve Chapelle—Festubert—the Dardanelles—the fear of not getting out—of not being “in it”—became a panic. Skene and Earnshaw, amid thousands of their kind and age, were up against the old “dugout” Colonels, who would not grant commissions to their “men” for fear of spoiling a smart company, from a belief that the private soldiers of the New Armies and the “Tommies” of Indian and South African wars must be alike, or from who knows what prejudice or paralysis of brain. But circumstances fought for Skene and Earnshaw. Losses in France were too heavy, especially among Infantry officers; commissions had to be granted. Earnshaw had applied for Artillery or Horse Transport. Skene had applied for Engineers or Intelli-

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gence; thousands of others had applied for special branches, stating qualifications that ranged through every useful branch of knowledge. All—all, except the few who commanded influence in high places, were sent into the Infantry.

Skene and Earnshaw had gone to the Second Reserve Battalion of a country regiment on the East Coast. The earlier "K" formations were already filled from Universities, and county families and public school O.T.C.s; and the Second Reserve were accumulating messes of 100 to 150 officers and battalions of 1,500 to 1,700 men.

Skene, Earnshaw, and many others, men whose thirtieth birthday was passed, were "fallen in" and addressed as "young officers" by Adjutants who had never been out of England, or put through their "setting up" drill by Marine Sergeants whose greatest experience of war was the Boxer Rising of 1900. How they existed through that summer many never knew. Some got away by influence or chicane to other jobs, some were mildly mutinous, or thoroughly dissipated. The majority had "stuck it," taking "courses" of machine-gunning, going route-marches with that bloated battalion that looked like a brigade, tak-

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ing leave, granted or ungranted, listening greedily to anything wounded officers from France would tell them, or to the tales of the many Colonials themselves. At last, with the shadow of Loos looming near, some bright intellect at Whitehall—some younger man who had perhaps been as far as St. Omer—asked: “Look here, why not have some reserves handy? We’re bound to have casualties.” The logic was irrefutable. The dispersal of those reserve battalions began: some went to the Dardanelles, but most to France. Many were middle-aged, some grey or bald, three-quarters were townsmen, as perforce any collection of Englishmen must be; some were Colonial, British South American, or Indian born. Skene was bidden to report to Embarkation, Folkestone. Excited, half-dressed, he rushed into the hut, where a tea-planter, a ship’s steward, and the biggest cash-draper in Durlam were also dressing. “I’ve got my orders! Come and have a drink before mess.” There was a moment’s silence. Then: “Why should we drink with you? Why should you have your orders? You’re not senior. It’s influence, that’s what it is!”

He spent a miserable week hanging about the

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base camp at Etaples, then a mere suggestion of what it afterwards became. Officers lived in little wooden messes, on their rations. There were no clubs; the one or two restaurants that provided meals were crowded out by 6 p. m. Skene, who knew the town through having stayed there one holiday to attend an art school, wandered across into the stucco flimsiness and shuttered desolation of Paris Plage. He knew a battle was going on—how was he going to get to it? Then his orders came.

He and Earnshaw found the battalion, not too easily, that night—and were astonished at the warmth of their welcome, until they dimly realized that the ten officers round the newspaper-covered table in that Flemish parlour, waiting so anxiously for some warm food, were the survivors of a full battalion mess of thirty.

In the morning Skene and Earnshaw were up early—too early—they wandered about for an hour before they could get any breakfast. They looked at the transport lines, and the early parade—astonished at the weak and lop-sided look of many platoons, the queer appearance of men without arms or equipment, who slunk into their places, looking dazed. They heard the bugles

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go "Sick parade." One of the cooks by the field kitchen sang the words:

"Sixty-four, Ninety-four,
He'll never go sick no more,
The poor beggar's dead!"

Skene was struck with horror . . . there, in face of the enemy, men sick, useless, clogging the wheels of the fighting machine! Somehow he never got over that feeling.

It was the first rude blow at the idea so prevalent among the enthusiastic volunteers of the New Armies, of going out to "fight," of pushing some such business as Loos on and on right into Berlin. It was the shock to find that the fighting depended on a large stationary military population, as vulnerable to illness or accident as the population of London. He went to breakfast hurriedly readjusting his mind. At the words, "Does anyone speak French?" he had almost leapt to his feet. Here was something he could *do*.

As he passed out to where old Vanderlynden stood, the Colonel asked: "Who's that officer?" and the Adjutant replied: "New reinforcement officer; came after you turned in last night, sir."

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From the extemporized mess to the farmer's part of the house, was like stepping from modern war into a Yorkshire farmhouse of the eighteenth century. On the long, smooth-worn bench under the window in the kitchen Skene sat with a cup of impeccable black coffee, and a wineglass of unpurchaseable brandy. Across the table, old Vanderlynden, who had resumed his cap, was propped in the one chair that could be described as easy, with his feet toward the closed Flemish stove, on the clean tiled floor. "Leinsche!" he called . . . "Madeleinesche!" ("little Madeleine"). From one of the inner rooms there came out one of those women who do not exist in England . . . whose dress was that of a woman of thirty, but whose clear, unlined skin and easy movements belonged to a girl in her teens; whose figure and manners might have earned her good wages in a big shop, but whose hands were developed by continuous use of the spade in youth . . . who served Skene without looking at him, but who, at the bidding of her old father, sat down opposite the Englishman, and looking him straight in the eyes, began, in a pleasant contralto voice, to expose in convent-taught French what was in the old man's mind.

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The young woman was terse. Skene took down the items; hop-poles stolen, horses grazing, a shed used for some purpose he could not quite understand. He made the whole into a report in his Field Message book, like a well-trained young officer of the New Armies, and went outside to see the damage. It was quite evident. The great hop-poles were in the transport lines, with mules and "riders" tied up to them, stamping and feeding. Other horses, "a bit poor" with the journey, had been cast loose and were grazing; but it was the shed at the back of the dwelling-house that was the real trouble.

Here, in stretchers or in blankets on the grass, lay some eighty of the battalion, all with the new disease, called everything from "para-typhoid" to "cold-feet"; known not by its symptoms but by its causes—standing up to the waist in filthy water without food or sleep, or "resting" in cattle trucks or barns, still wet. Nothing to be done—part of the enormous waste of war! It was the first real lesson on war's nature that Skene was taught.

He put it all down in his Field Message book. He further put down exactly what it was that Mademoiselle Vanderlynden said her father

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complained of: "You must not suppose that we are against the English. We know that we should have been beaten without our Allies." (No trace of cajolery there!) "It is a pleasure as well as a duty to have the troops billeted in the farm. We know quite well that the men must live, that their rations are never sufficient. We have men of the family mobilized, who would tell us all this if we did not know. But the Government force us to grow corn and keep cows, and we cannot do this if you take our pasture and spoil our reaping machine without paying for the damage, not to mention the hop-poles you have destroyed or burnt . . . or at least give us a requisition paper." Satisfied that she had made Skene understand, she appeared to take no further interest in him, until he had finished writing his report. Then she said: "You are going to see to it at once?"

"At once, Mademoiselle."

"A thousand thanks!"

"What a woman of business!" thought Skene and went to the orderly room.

He had to wait some minutes before the Adjutant, busy with a pad of wires, a map and some typewritten orders, noticed him.

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“Well, Skene, what is it? Oh yes, what did old Kruger want? Oh! I see! Well, go back and offer him forty francs, as you suggest, and tell him he can have his barns and out-houses and any dam’ thing he pleases. I can’t say about the hop-poles—tell him to make a complaint. We move in the morning up to the Line. You’d better cut along and see—oh, yes—see Thomas, D Company. That’s all.”

“Yessir. Do you want this, sir?” Skene was still holding his report.

“No. Tear it up. Done with.”

And Skene went off to settle old Vanderlynden and then to find Thomas, having learned another lesson in the art of that war worth more than musketry or marching, drill or discipline; to keep abreast, not of the actual situation, but of the next but one; so rapidly did changes come and the necessities of the moment outrun the provisions of the past.

Who would be Sixty-four, ninety-four next?

CHAPTER II

Up to the Line

NEXT morning the battalion moved off. Skene had been posted to No. 13 Platoon, which gave him the best possible view of the hindquarters of the charger ridden by the commander of D Company. This did not seem amiss. Nothing did on these fine October mornings when the New Army, undaunted and high of hope, started on those first marches in which the physical comfort of motion was still combined with the illusion of really going somewhere. The tedious unreality of training was over. Loos was a brief bad dream. They were going to fight. That was what he had enlisted for.

An hour passed and the first halt was called. On moving off again, the Company Commander, a tall fair lad of eighteen, got down and walked with Skene, giving him his first true insight into that "great British victory," as the papers called

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it, the Battle of Loos. "Never saw such a show; weeks and weeks of marching, full of beans; then up a road to a place called Vermelles; everything chock-a-block; mules and men and guns all mixed up. Then they took us out over the open; bare ground all cut up with shell-holes, old trenches; then it began to rain. When we took up our line, everything was soaked, no one knew anything; no grub, no water, no ammunition; and when at last some one found us, after the Bosche had blown hell out of us for two or three days, some fool on our left had given way and the only order we got was to go back. My word! you should have seen us! . . . The men have picked up wonderfully these few days, but there's heaps of sickness besides the casualties."

The speaker, by rank and name Captain Thomas, more than ten years Skene's junior, had obtained a Special Reserve commission straight from that University in which, at the outbreak of war, he had been learning what bad form it was to know anything. The narrative of his experiences at Loos was given in the disjointed sentences of one who knew that description was not his business. It conveyed little to Skene,

UP TO THE LINE

not because it was bald and disjointed, but because Skene, like all the New Army reinforcements, was thinking: "Ah yes, my boy, that's what happened to you, but wait until I get there!" The warnings that should have surmounted even the scrupulous understatement of Thomas were lost on Skene, who was admiring the roofs and spires of the rail-head town they were approaching. Not Bruges, by a long way, still less the Italian cities of Skene's education, but it had tall towers with belfries, long regular whitewashed buildings, barracks or convents, with steep roofs, weather vanes, and many trees.

They halted; a rumour came down to D Company that the town was under long-range bombardment.

Ahead, the Adjutant was consulting a military policeman as to an alternative route. Having seen his men fall out correctly, Skene joined a group of officers to watch. Then, for the first time in his life, he heard an unforgettable sound, as though the heavens, made of cheap calico, were being torn to lengths by some demoniac draper. The bump of the shell followed and a crashing explosion, with the roar of falling bricks, and a shriek of scattering humanity—then a pink

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cloud of brickdust rose and bellied out over the cobbled streets of the Flemish town. The men cheered, groaned, made bets on the next shot; the officers grinned in sympathy.

It was dusk before the battalion passed beyond cultivation to the desolation that bordered the trenches, and found, at a battered and deserted level crossing, four mud-plastered guides.

This was before the day of regular trains, and the battalion passed the zone of the heavy guns and forward dumps on foot, breaking up first into companies, then into platoons, and marching in silence. The night was fine and dry, the deepening silence was punctuated by a noise, that was to become as much a part of life as the ticking of a clock in the midnight silence of home—a noise as of some insane woodpecker; the rat-tat-tat of the indefatigable Bosche machine-guns. On a crest that rose slightly above the dead level of the plain, a greenish glare soared up, hung a moment, and wasted out. Then another soared further to the right, amid the gaunt skeletons, crowned fan-shaped with splinters, of a row of trees. By this light Skene saw that the soft mush in which he was treading was the self-sown, unharvested corn of a once tilled field.

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Among the ruins of a cottage, a murdered handful of battered brick and mortar—they entered the communication trench.

Such trenches, afterwards developed to perfection and complexity, were then nothing more than waist or breast-deep excavations, with slipping walls and floored with deep and noisome ooze. They were, moreover, so few and well known to the enemy and so regularly shelled or enfiladed by machine-guns, that the older hands preferred risking the open.

The first few bullets whistled overhead, too high. But soon came the tearing shriek, the crash and scatter of shrapnel, the ducking and bunching of startled men, and that first hearing of the cry, never quite to be forgotten: "Stretcher-bearer!"

Details of the next three hours are merely tedious and incomprehensible to those who have not been "there," tedious and only too comprehensible to those who have. Skene found the rear of his platoon held up by the stretcher party, and then his passage blocked by other units. His guide tried a short cut which led into mud and wire and on into the lines of a brigade that was not his. Back, in mud and wire, over drains and trenches, bodies and ruins, in and out of latrines

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and shell-holes, lying flat for minutes together while machine-gun fire swept over them, Skene entered at last, from the spoil-pit at the back, the trench he was to hold, two hours overdue. He found a weary subaltern with sarcasm on his lips and a crumpled list of trench stores in his hand. "Sign! I don't want to be caught in here in daylight."

Skene signed. The subaltern and his men moved off, and the last he heard was:

"What's yon relief?"

"Noo armies!"

"That means comin' back to-morrer night t' take these trenches back again, sure enough!"

Skene, bitterly insulted, bit his lips and kept silence.

The dawn broke in a fierce crackle of musketry. Skene rested his head against the parapet, the only dry firm place he could find. He had thoroughly surveyed his ground. His men were all "standing-to."

They were in a section of fire-trench fifty yards long, blocked at each end and fed from a communication trench half cemetery and half latrine.

They had two and a half boxes of ammunition, two boxes of bombs, and some Verey lights.

UP TO THE LINE

There were some noisome holes for dug-outs into which none of his men had been as yet fatigued enough to crawl.

What would happen if the enemy attacked, or if he himself were ordered to attack, he did not even consider. He was thinking, with a sense of almost tragic finality, that this was the end of the journey. The recruiting room, the training camp, the O.T.C., the base camp, the railhead town, all led to—this. There, a few yards away, were the Germans. And he, who a few months ago had never thought of being a soldier, much less an officer, least of all a combatant in the front line of a European War, was, on his own and only responsibility, standing to hold No. 13 Section of the “Z” lines of the British Expeditionary Force, against the enemy. The hierarchy on which he had been trained to depend had suddenly disappeared. Brigade, even battalion head-quarters, were miles away. Thomas, with the remainder of the company, was four hundred yards back, only accessible by a field telephone that had already been twice cut by shell-fire, and could not be repaired in daylight. Training had hardly covered these possibilities.

In the twilight chequered by the greenish Ger-

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man flares, listening to the ceaseless tapping of the Bosche machine-guns, and the continual swish, crash and clatter of shells, over nearly a hundred miles of French or Flemish soil, Englishmen like him were doing as he was—in the Line.

CHAPTER III

Relief

"SOMEWHERE IN FRANCE,
"November, 1915.

"DEAR UNCLE,—

"I duly received your letter, together with the books, cigarettes, woolly cap and socks. Thank you all very much, the parcel was most acceptable. The post here is wonderfully regular, and we get a delivery once a day, bar accidents.

"You ask me what it is like, but I fear I can't give you much idea. You see the address from which I write—well, that secrecy runs through the whole business. We are as anonymous and invisible as possible. We are told that if information as to the names or positions of units is put on paper, it is likely to leak out, and we shall be spotted and shelled. That is dangerous, of course, and above all uncomfortable. Here am I, with all my clothes and equipment on me, ly-

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ing in a wooden box like a coffin with the end knocked out, buried in a beetfield. The space where my notebook lies is the only dry bit on the floor of my dug-out, but I am protected from the rain by the roof. Now, if we are shelled with any accuracy, these small comforts will all disappear, and we shall all have to wallow in the mud in the rain until we can burrow out some more holes. So you see there is some point in all this secrecy."

Here Skene's elbow, on which he was leaning, hurt him so much, that he had to give up and rest.

He was writing to his uncle, who had asked for some idea of what the life was like and how he was getting on, as relatives did in those days, when to have a nephew, son or cousin "fighting in the trenches" was still new. The Bosche then had what used to be called "command of the air," and to be seen by their 'planes meant a length of trench shelled to bits, somebody killed, and the rest left shelterless in the Flemish winter; so the "fighting" that went on "in the trenches" consisted in keeping out of sight. Skene had, therefore, ample time and tried to set down things about him as he saw them. He went on:

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“During daylight we have to be very careful to keep under cover. I can put my head out, or even stand up, if I am careful, but I can see nothing except what appears to be miles and miles of sewage farm, upturned earth, broken posts and wire, decay, stench and desolation, with here and there a mound of splintered brick or a length of granite-paved road, to show that it was once a stretch of goodish agricultural land, not unlike some of the Peterborough flats below Wansford. There is some high ground, gravelly and wooded, to the south and west, but north, is the sea-level marsh, and the Bosche sit all round us on a ridge that rings us into it. However we’ve managed to hang on here beats imagining.”

At this point, perceiving that he had written what would not pass the Censor, he tore it up.

He next began: “One gets rid of many preconceived notions. For instance, Baptism of Fire, as it used to be called, is not panicky in the least, but rather exhilarating. The first shelling near us made the men cheer and I wanted to join them. The first bullets made them mock and I even smiled, the first dead man was not pretty, but after a curious feeling of ‘where are the police? something ought to be done about this,’

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one gets used to it. Of course one's first impulse when a man stumbles and drops is to tell him to get up. But there are many one does not see. The Bosche knocked down a house on to eight of my men the other day. We dug the ruins over but only found two bodies. The shell fell directly on the others, I suppose. They are reported 'missing.' It looked simply like a bad accident in a brickworks."

When he got to this point, Skene read what he had written. "Oh, Lord," he thought, "I shall give them the horrors!" and he tore it up.

He began again:

"At dusk, directly the light is too dim to see movement from one trench to another, there's a most extraordinary scene. Do you remember the old Doré pictures of the Resurrection? Well, just like that. Men that have lain hidden in or just beyond the lines suddenly appear out of their holes. From further back come parties to dig, bring rations or ammunition, by hand, or by limbers drawn by mules.

"What has been all day a solitude, baleful, and ominous, suddenly becomes as busy as a marketplace, and the Bosche never leave off their incessant machine-gunning. Darkness makes no dif-

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ference to them, because their theory is, not to aim at a man and hit him with a bullet, but to cover any interesting point on the map—cross-roads, copse or bridge—with a sheet of lead that anything moving must walk into. We say the Bosche is nervous, is afraid of us, and nearly beaten. Certainly he makes more fuss. The everlasting flare-lights, the continual shooting, the immense care in screening his men, are symptoms of it. We think that once the winter is over and we get a move on, we shall crumple him up.

“Personally I shall be glad. I think it will be a relief. This living in the Line in the face of machine-gunning that is always superior to ours, and artillery and aircraft that generally are, takes it out of a man. But what a splendid lot! My best men are a poacher and a Salvationist preacher. Then come the young football-playing clerks, to whom sniping and bombing are still exciting; the older men, mechanics, artisans, shopkeepers, are wonderfully sensible and handy. At first they were nonplussed, as everybody is, by the casualties and the primeval conditions. But they soon set to work to make the best of it. Most of them are quite handy at getting

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a good fire to cook food and dry oneself by—which I now see to be the first cardinal point, and very nearly the whole art of soldiering. The actual shooting and bombing don't take up much time. There is no bayonet work. The agricultural labourers we keep for digging and sanitary fatigue. They have so little spirit, I don't feel sure how they would behave if rushed, and their health is so poor. The great thing about them is that they don't care what they do, making graves or emptying latrines!"

Skene read it through, then tore it up. He rested his head on his hands. He did not know what to write. Eventually he put down:

"DEAR UNCLE,—

"Thanks for the woolly cap and the cigarettes and chocolate. They were most welcome and it is jolly good of you. The weather is not too bad for the time of year. Give my kind regards to every one at the office and tell them we are winning fast, and I shall soon be home.

"Ever yours,

"GEOFFREY."

At the end of a wet week, after many false rumours, a message came that the battalion was

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to be relieved. It was brought to him from Company Head-quarters by an orderly who reached him just before daybreak. He spent the daylight hours, during which no one could move, in making a report on the state of the section of the line held by his platoon. At last, the early dusk came down, opaque and humid, and the first star-shells began to rise from the German lines; he set out with his orderly along the parapet of a water-logged trench for Company Head-quarters, the only possible path, to take his orders for the move. Good Lord! Those rehearsals of that movement during training in England! The scenery had been lacking a bit! But Skene was engrossed in his carefully written report on the state of the trenches, with illustrations.

Even that persistent race, the German machine-gunners, were less active in the autumn damp and darkness. Few bullets hissed about his ears, or thumped the greasy embankments beneath his feet; above the moderated clamour he could hear a sound of wading in the glutinous sludge between the trenches, and the lively whistling of a music-hall tune. The whistler was little Mansfield, the machine-gun officer, a brown-eyed, under-sized imp of eighteen, just let loose

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from a public school, who, after the shortened course at Sandhurst, had come out to France that summer without passing through the ranks. A more perfect temperament for trench warfare than that of little Mansfield could not have been invented. Still a child, completely irresponsible, with nothing in his past to ponder over, and no inclination or capacity for thought about the future, with fox-hunting ancestors, and a public school training, he was the very plum of perfect health and physical condition: the desolation in which he lived didn't even touch his insensitive little spirit, and his English humour, often called to-day "the modern love for ragging," as if there were something new about it, found plenty of time for expression. He was given to "ragging" Skene and Earnshaw. They seemed to him, no doubt, to deviate from that exact good form to which he had been brought up. Skene had a knowledge of drainage and draughtsmanship, had been heard discussing Home Rule without violence—very middle class. One didn't ostracize a brother officer, of course, one merely "ragged" him for his good. Besides Skene was bigger than himself, so that sarcasm was all

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Mansfield's sense of fair play permitted him to use.

With Earnshaw, Mansfield was more cautious. The Lancashire man had travelled, and was less tolerant than Skene. He said openly that he had "no use for school kids"; and refused to loan a limber to the machine-gunner, saying he would only "mess my mules about. He's not old enough to be trusted!"

But Mansfield was irrepressible, no snub ever affected him for long. "Hallo!" he chirruped at Skene. "How are you enjoying the War? I know I shall have a cold. Mother said I wasn't to play in these nasty trenches. Hurry up, Skene, you'll be late for the office!"

They splashed and slid together in the dark foul waters of the second-line trench, to the one-time cellar of an estaminet that had stood by a paved road. In those Company Head-quarters, Long Thomas, the Captain, Earnshaw, Skene and Mansfield (the company was always two officers short) were just able to wedge themselves between the grimy sweating walls and a Second Empire lacquer and brass-bound drawing-room table, brought from a neighbouring château, which

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occupied the whole floor space. With heads against the raftered ceiling, and feet propped on sandbags out of the six inches of water on the floor, there was just room to use map, message book and pencil. Stuck in a bottle was a candle which smoked the studies of the nude from "La Vie Parisienne," nailed on the boarding by hands now folded probably beneath the sodden clay of spoil-pit graves.

Long Thomas detailed the instructions for handing over their trench to the incoming battalion, and gave them a rendezvous for marching back to rest camp. Skene diffidently brought forward his report, with its suggestion that bits of the line should be held by patrols of machine-gunners, and the rest of the men saved for emergency. He was heard in gloomy silence. Thomas put the serious obstacle: "You see, we're weaker than the Bosche in artillery and machine-guns, and if once we let go of a bit of line, goodness knows how we should ever get it back, and the effect on the men would be very bad."

"The effect on the men is bad as it is," persisted Skene; "they've neither shelter from the weather nor cover from fire; I've lost eight by wounds

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and seven by sickness, doing absolutely nothing!"

Mansfield's voice rose in broken squeaky imitation of the battalion's venerable Major left behind at Brigade Head-quarters: "That's what you're here for, sir! What d'you think I brought you all the way from England for, sir, except to be cannon-fodder?"

Just then the Quarter-master-sergeant's Corporal appeared with his report: "Rations up, and all correct, sir, and letters!" There was one for Skene, and one for Mansfield.

Skene's was from Madeleine Vanderlynden. The feel of the thin grey note-paper, covered with spidery sloping French script, gave him astonishing pleasure: "I must be enjoying this life even less than I knew," he thought.

The letter ran: "Excuse the liberty I take in addressing you, but I do not know to whom to apply. You arranged so well that the soldiers of your regiment should respect the buildings and machinery necessary for our agriculture, and since your departure another regiment has come and taken all the barn, and has broken the fences of the pasture so that we have to pay a boy to keep the cows from straying. I regret troubling you, but I do not know to whom to apply.

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"My father sends his respects and wishes he were with you.

"We have no news of my second brother Marcel.

"The regiment is the Cannock Chase Rangers."

These everlasting civilians, couldn't they understand it was war-time? Perhaps it was just as well they couldn't!

The squeal of Mansfield, who had long read his letter, a tailor's bill, and who had been turning over Skene's neatly written and sketched pages, broke the silence: "Report on the state of the front line, section Z 13. Look here, Thomas, this fellow Skene's written a book about the War. What's an outfall? Is that where you fall out!" Thomas scanned again the closely written sheets and plans.

"I think I'd better not forward this report of yours, Skene; it won't do you any good with the General!"

Skene agreed (no one disagreed with Thomas), called his orderly, and set out for his platoon.

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The "relief" of the battalion by that which took its place was dragged out for hours. Skene's

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platoon was not relieved until nearly eight o'clock. Skene let his men squeeze out and get on their way with his Sergeant, keeping only his servant with him.

He found himself faced by a dejected young officer whose first remark was, "You 13 Platoon, what a mess you've let the place get into!"

Skene explained that in the absence of any comprehensive drainage system all they could do was to shift the omnipresent flood from one small section into the next and back: he handed over the meagre trench stores, and recorded his opinion that the front line was only fit to be held in parts by moving patrols, and not fit for habitation. At which the other shrugged his shoulders and replied: "I suppose we shall get on somehow. Where are those d——d rations?" It was the attitude, at that period, of the whole B.E.F.

Scrambling back through shell-hole and over broken posts and wire, Skene and his servant got as far as the second line, where in the communication trench they met the ration party of the incoming battalion huddled under a crumbling parapet. "We've just had one over, sir, and Fritz always sends two!"

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Sure enough, in a few seconds came the second shrapnel shell, falling short with a great splashing of muddy water and whizzing of jagged bits. Skene pushed on, overtook his own platoon, and heard his Sergeant's report of the slow progress. "First we was stopped in the trench and had to get out into the open, sir; then we found a lot of wire and had to go round it; then, afore we could get back into the trench, young Lewis was hit by a stray—bad he was—and we had to send him off."

They struck out on to what remained of the Courtrai road, let the returning transport by, with its shrapnel-inviting clatter, and plunged wearily down, through shell-holes and past remains of mules, farm carts, hedges and trees, till, under the welcome shelter of the canal bank, Skene gave the word: "You may smoke!"

When, leaving the canal bank, they made for the ploughed-up and deserted railway crossing, it was now nearly eleven by Skene's wrist-watch: the men's fatigue and the bad condition of their feet had reduced the pace to a crawl. They passed D Company stragglers; the weary, cheerful voice of Thomas hailed them. They had rejoined the company, sagging and plodding

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toward the camp in the wood. Skene remembered counting his men in like sheep, including one on his hands and knees to save his raw feet, and two left at a wayside dressing station. How he got to his hut and fell asleep he did not remember. It was not necessary. The battalion was relieved.

CHAPTER IV

The Natives

WHO will ever forget the first hours of "Divisional Reserve" after the trenches? The camp in the woods was only three miles from the line, long-distance shots at railhead went clean over it; it was at best a swampy clearing, cluttered up with tree stumps; furnished with two or three huts for "messaging," a score of shelters for sleeping, horse lines, and the remains of the yellow-flagged urinals of an Indian division. But you could walk about, bolt upright, without ducking your head, you could whistle and sing, sit at a trestle table to feed, meet the other companies of your battalion; and, best of all, you were "fallen in" and marched, with halts if there were much shelling, to the old brewery at railhead, where the men had the great vats and the officers the mash-tubs, for a bath. There were still shops open here, a market-place, civilians afoot, and you

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could wander about a bit. At a restaurant in the side street you could engage a table in the hopes that you might come in to dinner one night and even go to the cinema. Never was there enjoyment like it. Old London days and nights seemed tame.

And the men! It took little more than twenty-four hours for these sodden and disconsolate scarecrows to become, by aid of sleep, baths, parades and the last autumn flicker of the sun, the same light-hearted crowd of overgrown boys that had marched out from the Spanish Farm, ten days before.

On the second morning after being relieved, Skene woke in the pinewoods with a light heart, and a body at ease. Long Thomas had promised him the loan of his "charger" to ride over to the Spanish Farm; Earnshaw, on a mount borrowed from the transport Sergeant, would ride with him as far as railhead, to get money from a field cashier.

It happened that, coming back from bathing parade, Skene had been sent for by the Adjutant, who handed him a file of papers: "Can you remember about this?"

Skene turned it over. "Passed to you, please,"

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from battalion to brigade, from brigade to division, from division to some authority at Boulogne of whom Skene had never heard. At the very bottom was a blue French printed form, headed "Claim for damage to Civilian Property, in view of law article—" covered with R. F.s and the stamp of the Mairie of the Commune. Here, duly set out and supported by *procès verbal* made by Valliant, Marius (gendarme, on duty), Skene read how Mr. Vanderlynden, Jerome, a cultivator, made the following complaint of hop-poles taken, grazing, and deterioration of agricultural machines.

"What does it amount to?" said the Adjutant.

Skene began to tell him.

"Oh, yes, and all the rest of it. I suppose we did it?"

"Part of it, there's no doubt, sir! The rest has been done since!"

"Can you settle it for another twenty francs?"

"I'll try, sir!"

"Here you are then. That's all the brigade have sent!"

It was a fresh late October morning; the last clusters were brilliant in the hop fields, and over the broad leaves of the sugar beet was spread a

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steel blue sheen. Long Tom's charger, black with a white blaze, took the lead of Earnshaw's Argentine-bred beast, which had the belly and ears of a mouse, the neck of a giraffe, the mouth of a wooden horse on the roundabouts, and paced with that disillusioned air peculiar to the animals of Infantry transport.

"What a country!" thought Skene, to whom the little squares of haricot, roots, and stubble already ploughed were like an immense tapestry unrolled. "These people must work dashed hard for precious little money," said Earnshaw. "What are you going back to the old billet for?"

"Row on about troops interfering with their agriculture. Going to see if I can interpret."

"'Myes, there's a girl there, isn't there?"

"I don't know and I don't care."

"Oh well, so long," said Earnshaw, as Skene turned off west, "I'm going to lunch in the town; meet you here at four."

Under the high-pitched roof and the old brick tower of the farm, Skene could see no sign of life. He had led his horse all round the outer yard and across the bridge, before he saw old Vanderlynden, bent and black, coming towards him between the currant bushes and the spirals

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of myriad flies gleaming in the sunlight. The old man took Skene's horse, silenced the clamorous dog, and ushered his visitor with much deference into the kitchen.

Yes, he had made his daughter write, because really there was no making oneself understood, but now the troops had moved on and they were left in peace. He regretted having deranged the officer.

For the second time Skene absorbed that great lesson of the War: "Never obey an order you have received. It is already too late. Obey the order for the time after next!"

Pulling out the old Fleming's "Claim for damage to Civilian Property," he said.

"Then this is useless. You renounce it?" The old man shook his head.

"No. I claim what is due to me by law!"

"Yes—yes—but how can I tell how much was done by my regiment, and how much by the next?"

"If the officer will only give himself the trouble to step into my pasture and look!"

They passed through the low dark old doors—through the varying layers of smell and mess to the old shed where the sick men had lain. There

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the flax was stacked at one end, the reaper-and-binder and cultivator parked at the other. In the rafters lay the heavy poles to which Earnshaw had tied his horses. They returned to the kitchen.

"Listen, Monsieur Vanderlynden," said Skene: "your hop-poles want a coat of tar; your machines a squirt of oil. Your pasture is all the better for the manure. Ten francs will cover the damage since I last settled with you!"

The old man heaved a sigh:

"I do not share your opinion!"

Skene took from his pocket two of the five-franc notes the Adjutant had given him.

"Will you take ten francs, or not?"

The old man grinned.

"There is no getting round you, my Lieutenant. Ten francs let it be. And now let us have something to take!"

Skene sat down in pleasant lassitude. How comforting to the eye were the greenery and sunlight, the clean tiles, black oak and shining pewter after the ugly miseries of the past fortnight! The old dog sprawling underneath the coffin-shaped stove blinked at him. In the dairy a separator was humming; there was a smell of coffee, hops, burnt wood and drying clothes.

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And the door was opened—by Mademoiselle Vanderlynden.

She seemed to have grown since Skene's last visit. Her carriage, dress, doing of her hair, well-buttoned boots, and clear colour were the same, but she seemed years older. She greeted Skene with formal politeness, and went, at the old man's request, to fetch a bottle of that special Burgundy which, apparently, he had bought from time to time to mark the progress of his tranquil and laborious existence, his marriage with Madeleine's mother, their succession to the farm, the birth of their children, the prizes gained by his stock. "And this," he said, "is the dozen of my son Marcel, of which we will drink a bottle because we have again news of him." He nodded to an enlarged photograph on the wall, of a young man whose chasseur's bonnet and tight collar, with bugle and numeral on the lapel, faintly disguised the bullet head and round shoulders of a Vanderlynden and a farmer. Smacking his lips, he added: "Good! Good stuff! What do you say?"

It was. Never had Skene felt so well, never was old kitchen so picturesque, garrulous old man so interesting, or girl so well worth looking at,

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though she never spoke a word. Skene accepted their invitation to the midday meal. And when the old man went off to see to his men, he stayed watching Madeleine interrupt her cooking to fill his glass. No, she was not exactly a pretty girl, and she was dressed for work rather than for show. But she was a person—not a chattel or a clothes-prop. She was like one of those women the old Flemings used to paint—quaint rather than beautiful—trim enough in figure and complexion—but real people, who ruled houses and probably husbands, and who made up in vitality and character for what they lost by not being fair and frail. When the silence irked him, he broke it with a commonplace, and she answered:

“Ah, Monsieur, this War, when will it end?”

“Quite soon, I should say, Mam’selle; we are going to——”

“I know—I have heard it all before——”

“Indeed—when?”

“Oh—how long ago—twelve months—the first time we saw the English——”

“And what did you think of us?”

“One was not in a state to think—the Germans had come as far as the cross-roads—one heard the machine-guns—I was alone here with my fa-

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ther, for my brothers, of course, were gone—Then, all at once, I saw men in flat caps in the yard!”

“What did they say?”

“Ah! funny things—an officer—a quite young boy, spoke to papa—with some trouble we found he was talking French.”

“Did you get on with them?”

“Oh, yes. They were nice to deal with—better than our poor old territorials—and so frank. The officer told papa—‘We are going straight between Douai and Lille!’”

Skene could not help smiling. He could see so clearly the well-dressed, brave, ignorant youth who was going “between Douai and Lille.”

Mademoiselle Vanderlynden went on:

“That was a year ago—they have not yet gone between Douai and Lille, and I sometimes think——”

“Courage, Mademoiselle, we are not beaten yet—on the whole we are winning.”

“Oh yes, we are winning—but—do you know what I think, Mister Officer?”

“What do you think?”

“I think the War will end up here, in these fields!”

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Skene laughed: "What, no march to Berlin?"

"Never—Brussels hardly—Lille perhaps and Strasburg if there are any left to march!"

"What, out of all the English, French and Russians?"

Watching her gaze at the flat Flemish landscape, woolly with slanting sunshine and moisture, Skene did not know what to say. There was an uncanny note of prophecy in her voice. Then she came and sat opposite to him, paler than usual, with eyes shining and red lips pressed out into a straight line:

"Listen! You have French troops near your trenches?"

"Yes!" said Skene guardedly, "somewhere near!"

"You would not do me a little service?"

"Why, of course, anything in reason!"

"It is this. The regiment of my fiancé is there. You would not go and see if there is news of him?"

"Why not? It might take a little time. One doesn't go into the lines of another army too easily."

"Of course, of course! If you would just go and ask?"

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“Go and ask! Why, I’ll go and find him, and take him out to dinner if I can get the evening off.”

“No, no, I only want news of him.”

The rosy clouds of Burgundy were suddenly pierced by the grey light of reality. “You mean you’re afraid that something may have happened to him?”

She stood up to attend to a casserole which was just coming to the boil. “I suppose so.”

Skene could think of nothing to say. She pushed the boiling pot aside and knelt—a pleasure to watch—by the lower cupboard door of an old press, gaily painted, polished with use, crowded with wedding crowns, pewter jugs, gaudy Flemish china, and cap-badges of British regiments that had been billeted at the farm. Madeleine unlocked a small drawer in the lower portion: “I’ll write you the name, but it is not to be shown to your friends, please. I trust you because you are *gentil*.”

She wrote out and handed him the name: D’Archeville—53rd régiment de Cavalerie!

So that was her young man? “But, my good girl, he’s never going to marry you,” he thought,

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and as though she could read that thought, she said:

“He is my *ami*—one calls its fiancé to English people—you will try to hear of him, won’t you?” And Skene promised.

A cloth was laid at the head of the table for the family and their visitor, while the men and women sat at the other end. The long heavy Flemish dinner, with its roast and boiled, gooseberry jam and gingerbread, wine and beer, spirits and coffee, dragged on into the autumn afternoon. Madeleine was entirely absorbed in serving her father and guest, and in passing their portions to the labourers. Skene was nothing loth to mount his horse, the farmer’s good cheer, heavy and solid, like the men, the houses, the beasts, the earth, even the thick, woolly sky of that country, had made him drowsy to the point of sleep.

Long Thomas’s charger, properly watered and fed, was lively enough to rouse him before he got to the cross-roads where he was to meet Earnshaw. He got down, lit his pipe and looked back through the elm-shadowed pastures and chequered arable at the Spanish Farm. There it stood, under the gravelly hillocks which con-

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tinue the blue chalk downs of the Pas de Calais, across the Flemish plain into Belgium. Past the trees he could just see the weather vane on the short tower and the wallflowered peak of the thatched gable from which he had come. From the hillocks to the north, and far down to the slag-heaps of the Lens coal-fields on the south horizon, was a land of unexampled fertility, of that satisfying beauty which exists only where form and colour are the clothing for home and plenty. And, clean across it lay the chain of those old Spanish farms, from the Artois to West Flanders, memorials of the time, not four centuries ago, when men had fought for that rich land. Generation after generation, fighting and grabbing and snatching—Romans and Franks, Spanish and French and Huns, and nature covered it up, and went on producing more than ever was destroyed. “Yes,” thought Skene, “but we die of the process—we others.”

And just then Earnshaw arrived, and remarked that it was a fine evening and a wonderful year for hops; he had had a deuce of a job to find the cashier and a long time to wait to get his money; and a dam’ good lunch, rather expensive, and

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they'd have to trot home most of the way to get through that beastly wood in daylight. Having told all his news, he asked: "How did you get on with the natives?"

CHAPTER V

The Chance

SUCH Englishmen as Skene and Earnshaw, who towards the end of 1915 were swamping the professional element in the British Expeditionary Force, had been picked, by a very rough sort of natural selection, from the million enlistments of the "Kitchener" armies; and they had under their orders the mass who had not the education, initiative, or will to rise out of the ranks. Above them, the small groups of regulars had, almost to a man, been of necessity pushed into staff appointments. Around them were a hundred thousand like themselves, company or battery officers of fighting units or services. They were drawn from the two main streams of English middle-class life—for the public-school men of military ages were either in, or as near as they could get to, the regular army, and the manual worker, however skilled, seldom rose to be an officer. One stream came,

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like Skene, from the professional and cultured circles—the other, like Earnshaw, from the business and speculating crowd.

The New Army of England contrasted sharply with the other armies of the world. Those who composed it were indubitably less soldierly, less trained, less officer-like than men of other nationalities, bred up in the close caste of conscriptive tradition. They were not so much officers of a national army, as prominent members of a gigantic football team—transmitting orders and taking initiative from a good-humoured agreement that—well—some one had to.

On the other hand, they possessed an immense advantage in their endless adaptability. From the early days, when recruiting posters portrayed them, with the query: “He’s happy, are you?” to the petering out of that grim jest about “enjoying the War,” there hung over them a preposterous air of riding a hobby. They learned to kill with a detachment as of learning fretwork. Even the serious Skene was interested in the upkeep of a trench, not because it was an order, but because he liked experimenting with earth and sandbags and water, bombs, and telephone wire. The proudest day of Earnshaw’s life was that

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on which he was appointed Transport Officer. They mostly carried the "pack" like their men, and French officers were just beginning to envy them.

In the rough draughty "mess" hut of the camp in the wood, during their four days' respite, there was little brooding over the morrow, or the fate before most of them. When the Colonel had withdrawn to his bunk, the Adjutant to his "office," and old Adams to his store, the rest played bridge or poker, yarned, smoked and sky-larked. Any one glumly complaining of a black eye from falling into a shell-hole, or of the rats in his dug-out, was recommended to "take more water with it." That year-long grapple with death was perforce to be looked on as an entertaining experience that no one ought to miss, in spite of the obvious gaps at the table, and the narrow forty-eight hours of safety that remained. Will there ever be again such "messes" as those of 1915?

The mail-bag was enormous, far larger than any regular soldiers would have had. For all these "young officers" (so recruiting authorities spoke of that unique gang of men whose average age was over thirty) had folk belonging to them

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far more fussy and articulate than the relatives of the "regulars." But if, into one of those messes, some one came with a rumour, "I hear there's to be a stunt at . . . next week," or "We are taking part in the 579th Brigade attack on the 20th," then all the indelible pencils and writing blocks would be neglected. To attack, beat the enemy, and get finished with the War was the primary desire of an army that wanted to get back to its proper job. Shell-fire, gas, and bullet wounds—horrible, of course, ghastly—but it didn't do to say so, not even to feel so. Carry on!

As Skene and Earnshaw led their horses back through the wood to the camp, Skene said:

"You needn't make a song in the mess about my going to the Spanish Farm billet. I went to oblige the Adjutant."

"You may have. But most fellows will think you went to see that girl!"

"Girl's nothing to me. She's got a young man of sorts in the French Army!"

"You know all the family history."

"What do you mean?"

"I think you're a silly ass!"

Just then the sentry on camp guard challenged,

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and they passed over to the transport lines in silence. Wading in the mud Earnshaw grunted: "I'll have this sort of thing altered. Ruining all the horses!" This was an *amende honorable*, for not at the point of the bayonet would he have said a word that might make a "mess" joke of Skene's visit to the Spanish Farm. He was as English as Skene, even more so.

Skene had hardly finished washing down the coarse, ample food, with whisky and water, when he was told an orderly was asking for him.

"What is it?"

"Wanted at Brigade Head-quarters!"

"Aha!" chirruped little Mansfield. "I thought as much. Wanted for espionage. I shouldn't wonder, receiving letters from French civilians, as you do."

"Hope they're not going to give you a job, Skene," said Thomas. "We're short enough as it is."

"Bad company, bad company," Mansfield's voice pursued them. "Give my love to Uncle Charlie!"

At that period of the War, the ordinary company officer like Skene regarded Brigade Head-quarters as akin to the throne of the Almighty.

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Divisional Head-quarters was an unknown seventh heaven that never came much nearer to the line than the railhead. As for Corps and Armies, they were outside this universe. With excitement and awe, then, Skene knocked at the newly painted door of a very new hut which an ambitious Royal Engineer had taken pains to surround with a white-painted railing. Bidden to come in, Skene came to attention in the small office, almost entirely papered with maps of the sector and nearly filled by a new pinewood table.

"Lieutenant Skene, sir, 10th Easthamptonshire Regiment."

"Quite so, wait a minute!"

Skene stood and stared.

Standing by the table was the best type of the pre-War army. Captain Castle, having fought through the bitter months of '14 and '15 as a company officer, had been made Brigade Major while under thirty, and only remained so out of loyalty to a selfish Brigadier. Well-born, well made, faultlessly brave, as indeed were all those old regulars, he was also thoughtful and well read, loved by his equals and adored by his men. Before the War he had mastered his job in double quick time, and been thought none the

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worse of for excursions into Asiatic gendarmerie and colonial militia. After twelve months of War, he was thinking far into the second and third years to come. He had never laughed at Territorials nor snubbed the New Armies. He was a skilled pianist, had abundant good humour, and was already on the brink of those large opportunities he subsequently used so fully. Standing between Colonel Gilford and a French interpreter, and so tall that he had to stoop, he had his finger and his keen eyes on a trench map, and his right ear cocked, as it were, toward the blanket-curtained door to the little mess-room where the General, a red-faced, white-haired cavalryman, Devlin, by name, and known as "The Devil Himself," was leading the discussion with his habitual snarl.

"They tell us that you speak French?" said Captain Castle.

"Yes, sir!"

"Are you sure?" came the bitter query from beyond the curtain.

"I think there's no doubt, sir; I hear that he has already been useful in that way."

The snarl continued:

"What is he in civil life?"

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"What are you?" asked Captain Castle.

"Architect and surveyor, sir!"

From behind the curtain came a muttered "Good God!" The Brigade Major covered it with, "Map no difficulty to you?"

"None at all, sir."

"Very well, Colonel Gilford and the interpreter will take you by car to the Head-quarters of the French division next us. Yours is the flank platoon on our left. It is most important you should be in close liaison with the French. Have you got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you anything else for Skene, sir?"

"No."

"Very well, good night, Skene!"

Out went the Colonel and Skene and the interpreter along the white paling to the car. The night was fine, the moonlight of amazing brilliancy. Up the pavé and over the bridge, they passed through a village under a belfry whose chimes swelled to meet them and died away behind; then, still on the pavé road, along the bank of a canal lined with French poplars, over another bridge into another village whose belfry chimes were marking the next quarter. They seemed

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to be going round and round in some moonlit dream and the numbing cold of the October midnight. Skene tried to break the spell by listening to his companions' monosyllables, but the dream went on, of shining sky, black poplars, gleaming canal.

They passed the sentry box of a British military policeman doubled by a blue-cloaked, helmeted gendarme; turned down a drive between two Noah's Ark trees to a doll's house of a bargeman's cottage, where, flapping in the moonlight, the tricolour swung above the porch. The car stopped with a crunch, they unbent their stiffened limbs and got down. A plane buzzed over them high up in the greenish silver sky, on some bombing raid.

Inside the cottage, in a well-shuttered room, some lean, autocratic gentlemen, with high, closed collars, white cuffs, and no belts or impedimenta, were engaged round files and maps and telephones on white deal tables. Skene reflected that never would any of his own polo-playing, pheasant-shooting superiors be so dry, so old, so competent as these sportless Continental theorists! Presented by the interpreter, welcomed

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with conventional effusion, complimented on his French, Skene was left to wait in a mess-room, and chat with a charming, sleek-haired, scented boy in pale blue, crimson and silver, over a glass of sweet "Malaga" and a harsh cigarette. This was his chance to ask for Madeleine's friend.

"D'Archeville" repeated the rainbow youth, "no officer that I know of that name is with the division, but we change so fast. You do not know the regiment? The 53rd Cuirassiers. But we are an infantry division. Well, well, he may be with the machine-gunners, as a private soldier. Many sons of good families prefer to remain in the ranks among their own sort. One is more at home. Does not that also occur with you?" And he lifted his pretty eyes, dark-circled with fatigue.

Skene thought not.

"Indeed!" replied the boy. "Do you know D'Archeville?"

Skene was forced to admit that he didn't.

"Well then, my friend, I don't know what interest you have in him, but if you really want to see him there is nothing for it but to go up to the front line, which is particularly bad on our front,

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and in this there would be some difficulty, on account of your uniform. But I could send a message for you if it is urgent?"

"No, not at all."

"In that case, my friend, if it is merely for the pleasure of seeing the face of some one you do not know, I should wait, I think, until circumstances are more favourable." And having thus delicately conveyed that he thought Skene mad or a liar, he filled up his glass and laughed. A gunner officer appeared with a bundle of papers, and led out into the moonlight. He spoke in fair English to Colonel Gilford. "When you begin, we will let loose the forty thousand devils." Skene stared. The gunner was replying to Colonel Gilford, and led beyond the canal bank, into the mouth of a communication trench: "Think you can find this again, if necessary!" Skene thought so. "Now, look here . . ." and comparing his map with Skene's he explained certain details. Skene noted them with nervous care and took his leave. An attack! The icy shock of the thought! Back in the car, scudding along the moonlit pavé, Skene revolved the problem—what, where, how on earth would they attack? The interpreter was speaking. Only by pressing his

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cheek close against the humid grey moustache could he make out the words, "What is it you want with D'Archeville?" Skene had forgotten all that in his new excitement. Madeleine and the Spanish Farm seemed worlds away. "A friend of a friend of mine . . . I should have liked to have shaken hands with him."

"You will find it difficult, he is a very particular young gentleman. I, for one, could not help you. He is a member of what they call the New France—all that there is of conservative and behind the times."

To Skene, who knew something of French politics, and that the interpreter was an agnostic paper manufacturer from Lyons, this cast little light on Madeleine's mysterious *ami*.

Dawn broke, it was near sunrise when they reached the level crossing, and Skene was dismissed to rejoin his company.

Back across fields and through deserted farms to the battalion, which had moved up during the night to a line of dug-outs in the embankment of a canal, Skene went to see Long Thomas and found that they would not move till dusk. Rolling himself in a blanket he lay down, tired out, on the wet earth. Through the opening of his

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dug-out, he could just see the dark canal, the row of poplars, with leaves glowing straw-yellow in the autumn sun, and beyond them again a little whitewashed lock-keeper's house, whose gaping windows and torn thatch let in the pale Flemish sky. And that small point of domesticity amid all that was so warlike brought his mind back to Madeleine and her lover. Hang the fellow! What was he to do? Write to him? See him? On what imaginable grounds, with what imaginable result? The wet came soaking through his blanket. "This time to-morrow," he thought, "I mayn't be here. There may be no me, no him—nothing!" And, rolling over on to what seemed a drier patch, he fell asleep. He had had his chance.

CHAPTER VI

A Brigade Affair

HIS orderly was not to wake him till tea-time, but the sun had just set when Long Thomas stirred him up with one of those broomsticks then in vogue among officers for sounding the impossibilities of the trenches they were supposed to use, and invited him to come and have a look at the scene of the night's operations. Crossing the canal by a pontoon bridge to the rear, they climbed the left wall of the lock-keeper's ruined cottage, and, lying flat on charred rafters, peered out through the shell-torn thatch. At their feet was the canal; beyond its further bank an ever-increasing desolation, where communication trenches ran out among the weeds and self-sewn crops of fifteen months' desertion, the mud lagoons of undrained ponds, the gaunt scarecrows of splintered trees and ruined fragments of walls and gateways gleaming like bleaching bones in the dying light. Right on the sloe-

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coloured horizon, always on the highest visible ground, the first star-shells of the evening vaguely marked the enemy entrenchments. To Skene it seemed flatly impossible that human beings should make their way in darkness across so many sloughs and pitfalls, but the cheery voice of Long Thomas giving him his orders, precisely in the tone in which he would have told him to go in first wicket and hit the bowling, was incredibly reassuring. "Two trees, and some brickwork, just there," and Thomas pointed; "you're second wave! If you're stuck, you stay there!" Skene said: "Yes, I see!"

Climbing down, they went to the dug-out which served for mess-room and Company Headquarters, where Thomas was to meet the other officers of his and the adjacent companies, for a last word. Years after, Skene used to shudder when he remembered that moment. The amateurishness of it all, that tiny concentration in plain sight of the Bosche, the utter lack of preparation or reserves—the, afterwards, patent fact that General Devlin, scornful of others' failures, was just experimenting, with a view to the command of a division. On the sweating walls of the candle-lighted den hung belts and rainproofs,

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between posted-up cartoons from "Le Rire," showing the Kaiser with a withered arm; its improvised table was covered with maps and signal forms, little pools of wine, little smears of grease and cigarette ends. Outside, the N.C.O.'s were "falling-in," the men under shelter of the embankment, in the gathering dusk. Within one heard: "I see . . . here and then here . . . good enough. . . . I suppose we shall—what's your watch!" and then an awkward silence, as if they were wondering.

From without came a North-country voice growling: "If Aaa catches 'em a'll slog 'em, bah gom!" and a Cockney: "Mind the barrow, please! The Sergeant said I was to have my little spade, but 'e won't let me take me little pail, no'ow, Gawd 'elp 'em!"

And Skene prayed from the bottom of his heart: "Pray God, don't smash me up this time. I didn't start this silly show. It's not fair I should be killed!"

A tall high-shouldered form came splashing along the slippery pathway and stopped beside him. It was Captain Castle.

"Hallo, Skene! Thomas in? Let's see him!" Bending nearly double under the low-opening he

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passed into the dug-out, with a word for everyone, a fixed time here, a definite place there, making sure that everybody knew where to look for him, and which way the walking wounded were to come. Skene ceased to pray. To trust in Castle seemed more effectual.

That fine day had ended in a clear sunset, but with darkness a light rain began to fall. Skene, with his Sergeant, passed slowly up the line of his platoon, feeling for himself that the extra shovels, bombs, and bundles of sandbags were in place; then, glancing at the luminous dial of his watch, he led his party along the steep embankment to the bridge. At the top, two tall figures stood, motionless, and as Skene passed, the Colonel's voice said: "All right, Skene?"

"All right, sir."

"Good luck to you."

Then began the slow and tiring journey to where they would "jump-off." The rain fell steadily; the mud rose above their ankles; there was constant hesitation in the pitchy quagmire to make sure of the right trench, constant halts to let those in front draw ahead, or close up the tailing-out which no amount of discipline or forethought ever entirely prevented among men

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marching in file. Of the enemy no sign save an occasional greenish star-shell that soared up into the downpour, hung glaring for a moment and went out; a few rifle-shots and a couple of long-distance shrapnel bursting far back over the transport routes. Then, before they had reached their shelter trench, the western horizon suddenly flared brick red, and, with a nerve-racking hiss, the first English shells passed over their heads and burst with dry crashes amid the darkness of the enemy trenches. From their left came a sudden, rapid, continuous, almost purring roll of gunfire. It was Skene's French friend letting loose "the forty thousand devils." By the time they had reached the jumping-off place, where the water rose halfway to their thighs, the bombardment was continuous. Skene leant against the low parapet in front of him. His head was singing and drowsy with the uproar—he squeezed down the line of his men to make sure they had each found proper foothold. Before he reached the end of his line, he was stopped in the narrow trench by some one coming from the opposite direction. It was Long Thomas.

"All right, Skene?"

"All right, Thomas."

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"They aren't half getting hell, are they?"

"It sounds like it."

"It's nothing to what we'll give them presently."

"Rath-er!"

"Cheerio! I'll come and see you as soon as you're settled in." He passed, and Skene thought: "Will you? I wonder." At last his watch marked the minute, and he gave the signal. Everyone scrambled or hauled himself on to the parapet. In an instant the lucky and sure-footed were yards ahead of those whose foothold had slipped in the dissolving mud, or, too eagerly, had slid forward on their faces. Skene, in an incredibly puny voice, as it seemed to him, kept shouting: "Keep together—keep together!" Then he was walking on nothing, immersed in evil-smelling mud. And a crash that seemed inside his head deafened and bewildered him. Struggling to his feet he ran his knees into a kneeling figure.

"There's a man hit, sir!"

"Never mind, go on!" And on they slid and stumbled together.

The uproar was now continuous, behind, above, before them; and beneath them the marsh quaked.

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Mud and iron flew through the air in what seemed solid masses; it had become as light as day. Skene could only think of one thing, to keep on cawing hoarsely, "Go on, go on!" The Cockney catchword he had heard in the dusk had caught on, and all about him, shopmen and clerks, labourers, mill hands, miners were bellowing at the top of their voices, "Mind the barrow, please!" as they skidded and waded, fell and died.

With a sort of dismay he was brought up sharp by the inky line of a trench. The voice of the Sergeant-major shouted to him from the darkness: "Half left, sir, half left. There's a plank across, and keep half left, sir. You're too far to the right!" He realized then that he was crossing their own front-line trench.

When he was over it he seemed to have before him a field of oats, "All a-blowing, all a-growing," but it was a thick bank of wire and they must grope their way to the opening. With demon hands scratching his face, rending his clothes, tearing his water bottle from his hip, his cap from his head, he plunged through that devil's garden, and blundered at last into a group of men, digging, grubbing, tugging asunder the tortured

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soil. They were the next platoon. Thrusting before him to the left such of his own men as he could find, he reached the mound of splintered brick and the two elm stumps, with their ragged fans of bough, allotted as his position. The German trench was beyond, but shells were still falling into it, making it a quaking line of light, a continuous eruption. Of the first wave, no sign. By chance, the right thought was uppermost in his mind, "Dig. Get cover." He passed from man to man, speaking a word here, giving a hand there, and praying in vain that the third wave would bring the reels of wire that alone could make them safe. The filthy mud splashed back in clods into the miserable gully that was beginning to appear, the air was alive with hurtling metal; the score or so of men were dropping one by one; a sort of dull frenzy settled down on Skene. He could hear a small voice calling, "Is that you, sir! Is that you?" "The fool!" he thought, crawling backwards and forwards amongst his men, "Who does he think it is!" Some one was pulling at his arms, a Cockney voice said: "I've brought Mr. Mansfield, sir." Suddenly around him appeared his

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own Sergeant, Mansfield's Sergeant nursing a Maxim gun, another of Mansfield's men with a tripod over his shoulder, and then a shrill mocking voice, as of some parrot from the underworld, said: "I say, Skene, do tell the band to stop! I want to reverse," and out skipped Mansfield's little figure in a smeary raincoat, mud-clotted from head to foot. The enemy's fire had slackened, and his voice chirruped above it: "Where have you been? I've been looking for you all over the infernal room. And here you are, sitting out by yourself—you know the next is ours!"

In the Operation Orders had occurred the sentence, "Immediate provision will be made for adequate machine-gun protection against counter-attack." Skene began to laugh. He held his head in his hands and a sort of dizziness overcame him. He sat down in a puddle. His Sergeant, kneeling beside him, was telling him how the rear section had got separated by a patch of impassable wire; they had been picked up by Mansfield and brought on to the old German trench which had been the first wave's objective. "But there's nothing to be done with that, sir, it's all to bits.

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There's no one in front, and nothing has come up from support. And what shall we do with these wounded, sir?"

What, indeed!

After setting up his gun, Mansfield passed with a jest, making his way further along. By the first glimmer of a feeble dawn Skene could see that they had scratched out some dozen yards of trench waist-deep behind the two tree stumps. Then the hurricane burst out afresh. Some one shouted: "Here they come!" Mansfield's machine-gun set up an unceasing gibber. Skene saw that his Sergeant was passing up and down behind his men, tearing open boxes of small arms ammunition. There was no need to order rapid fire. With one long yell, "a-a-a-a," the men were beginning to work the bolts of their rifles as if frantic. Nothing else to be done! It was instinctive, the one poor outlet for what all had been feeling. The men were behaving well, after what they'd been through! Pulling himself up behind a jutting ledge of brickwork, Skene stared into the greenish-white vapour, where the British barrage was bursting, and into which his men were emptying their rifles. For several minutes, it seemed, he watched. Nothing emerged from

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that belt of vapour. The firing slackened. The counter-attack was not maturing.

Instead, as the sullen November day came up, Skene found himself chained by a network of machine-gun fire. Two of his men were hit at once, he told the others to lie close. He himself peered out from time to time. Nothing to be seen but vapour—freshly torn earth—broken pickets—shredded wire—bodies and water—and all visible surface whipped with vicious bullets. No message could reach him, no ammunition, no medical aid.

About midday he let his men eat what they had on them. There was no hope of cooking anything. By two o'clock the enemy were enfilading the little trench. Skene crawled along, literally over his men, some sleeping the sleep of exhaustion, some grim and pale, shivering as they clutched their rifles. The wounded were quiet, very white, either dead or collapsed. At the end of the line, Skene found his Sergeant lying on his back, his cap over his face. Skene pulled him by the arm, but the arm came away in his hands. The Sergeant was cut limb from limb by a shell that had landed beneath him.

Next, a long-distance bombardment was opened

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on them. Their machine-gun, the brickwork and the tree stumps were first smashed piecemeal and finally blown away. But the Flemish winter day is short, and with dusk came a runner, worming his way in on his stomach, with a written order from Thomas, "Bring in your men."

Under cover of darkness, twenty-three men, dragging and carrying two wounded, who still appeared alive, all of them soaked and starved, scratched, torn and plastered with mud, made their way back in darkness to the old front line.

Skene went to see Thomas. The companies were all mixed up. The first wave had been held up by uncut wire and blotted out, leaving Skene's party uncovered. It was not even possible to know how far the artillery had helped or hindered.

So ended that Brigade affair. Skene had lost half his men, had not seen a German, and had come back to his starting-point.

CHAPTER VII

One Game and Another

THE battalion had been at rest for some days in a convent of a railway town. They were no longer recognizable for the same men that Skene had helped to march back from the line.

Reclothed, roughly but well-fed, shaved and no longer starved of sleep, they were laughing and singing about the field kitchen in the courtyard under the giant chestnut trees. It was a fine November day, and the blue smoke curled up quietly through the rust-coloured leaves into the pale Flemish sky. They had got over the exhaustion of the attack, the despair of failure, the jealousy of the kilted battalion of regulars, who, helped by a bombardment of three days instead of three hours, had eventually straightened the line.

They had got over the bitter nights and mornings of torrential rain, and those first frosts, when every semblance of a trench fell in, and the bat-

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talion after being relieved, instead of coming out from the line, had been kept on the canal bank and sent up every night to dig. Here in the town they could walk about on the firm paved road, where the mud was seldom above their ankles, where there were still a few shops, restaurants, and actually a cinema. The third week of November had turned mild and fine, and with the sun and rest, the old jaunty spirit had come back. Skene shouted for his breakfast and hurried the N.C.O.s through the necessary parade and company business. Thomas had gone to Brigade Head-quarters, Skene commanded the company, and they were to play the semi-final of the Brigade Football Tournament that afternoon on the archery meadow behind the church.

Free of his duties, Skene set out for the field behind the church. It was market day, and crossing the square, he wondered if he would see Madeleine or her father. Here, amid rows of black-hooded gigs, and the low stalls stacked with butter, eggs, chickens and cheese, people were haggling and bartering—old men in black broadcloth with black glazed peaks to their Dutch caps, old ladies of astonishing circumference and garrulity, bareheaded young girls with their hair

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carefully dressed, and wonderfully neat stockings and boots, rough skirts, cotton blouses, and strong hardworking bodies. One or two of them offered their wares to Skene but the majority were content to examine him with leisurely curiosity. He could see neither Madeleine nor her father, and, having made sure that the football ground was in order, went back to the billet. In the afternoon he lounged peacefully smoking around the pasture where the match was played, trying to explain to the Brigade interpreter why it was fitting that officers should turn out in shorts and referee, and treat respectfully the captain of the side, although he was the Sergeant-major's servant. Under a mild sky, in that damp rich meadow rose the old familiar shouts, the drub-drub of the ball, the rustle of feet, the piercing whistle of the referee. It was England, simply a piece of English life cut neatly out and pasted on the map of Flanders. Behind the spectators—men and officers, astonished natives and a few derisive French soldiers home on leave—Brigadier-General Devlin strolled with Colonel Gilford, smoking and watching the play. Skene caught these words:

“Have you got accustomed to these middle-aged subalterns?”

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"Yes, pretty well. That bald-headed officer over there gives his age as thirty-five, and none the worse for that. On the contrary, all work and no raggin'!"

And just then Skene saw old Vanderlynden in a high cart behind an old white horse plodding slowly along the pavé bordering the pasture, without much guidance from the reins. He slipped through the hedge and put his hand on the shaft. Old Vanderlynden raised his cap. "Good day, my good sir! We have had bad news. My young lady's young man is in hospital!"

Skene expressed his sympathy: the old man, elbows on knees, looked at the flies on the horse's back.

"We have been to the hospital, but he is not to be seen!"

"How is that?"

Here the old man became strangely garrulous:

"My good sir, it was like this. We got the news that he lay in hospital at five o'clock of the evening. Too late then. We went to bed; she slept little, I think. In the morning, we got out the cart and started. At the station we found a notice. In case of necessity, relatives of wounded can have half-fare ticket. We ask, but it is not

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granted without the written request stamped with the stamp of the Mairie. So we went back, to write our request and get it stamped. Blanquart, the Secretary, is not at home, but at the end we find him and it is done. We catch the train and arrive at the hospital and show our papers. He is not there!"

"Do you mean they have evacuated him?"

"They do not say: they only say, in French, he is not there!"

Skene looked at the round eyes, the roughly shaven chin, the horny outstretched hand. He saw so plainly that utter incapacity to spend three francs too much even to cheat Death, the dumb acquiescence in some orderly-corporal's "Pas ici!"

"Well, what are you going to do now?"

"It is just that, my Lieutenant, for which I have come to speak to you. My daughter thinks you might help her . . ." ("Oh, yes, I daresay," thought Skene.) "It seems, since it was an English hospital to which he was taken, he will go to an English base. We, as civilians, may not use the telephone, and I do not know if they would answer us, at the hospital—but they would answer you!"

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"You want me to telephone, do you?"

"My little girl waits always at the station to see if you will not, my Lieutenant! You have only to get up here beside me, and come and speak to her!" He spoke to the old horse in Flemish.

Colonel Gilford, on his way from the football field to a conference at Divisional Head-quarters, heard—above the cheering and the raucous: "Come on, you Clyde-strikers!" "Right, we will so!"—the clop-clop of the heavy-footed old white horse, and saw one of his officers being driven down the street by a "native," in a black gig. It confirmed his saddest suspicions of the New Armies.

The station was a stucco building with a portico and arcade, cluttered up with military offices, and almost lost among sandbags, waiting lorries, and fidgeting mules in limbers.

In the dark waiting-room sat Madeleine Vanderlynden, between a swine-fever notice and an appeal of the new War Loan. She had left off for the occasion the clothes of her daily life, and was dressed in a dove-grey tailor-made costume, and what Skene would have described as a "decent" hat. She was sitting perfectly still,

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holding her gloves and her little bag. Skene thought that except for her boots, too high and pointed in the toe, she might have passed as "nice" in Easthampton suburbs. She rose, held out her hand, and said: "Monsieur, you would do me a great service if you would telephone!"

Skene pushed into the R.T.O.'s office, told off the Corporal in charge, and called up the Clearing Station. He got through to the orderly officer and put his question. The officer didn't know. He was a busy man, and relatives were a plague. Casualties were notified through the proper channels in due course. As for French casualties in an English hospital, they were a nuisance, like their relatives. Their nominal roll was kept separately and could not be found. Anyhow they had gone. Skene went back to Madeleine, who was sitting just as he had left her. The old man stood by her, gazing at the floor, with his hands hanging at his sides. In that case, she asked, would he not get her a lift in a car to the base? Skene couldn't do that. He fidgeted, and looked at his feet. Madeleine stifled a sob, while the old man spat carefully in a corner. "Perhaps he's been transferred to another sector," said Skene. She answered bitterly: "I want to see

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him!" It dawned on Skene that she didn't understand, and didn't want to understand, even the most necessary and elementary Army Routine. He felt helpless, and cast about for some phrase to express his feeling that what was done was done, the dead were dead, and here was he alive, to-day, and possibly dead to-morrow, and the least bit tired of being a disinterested third party. But he only enquired what troops were now billeted on the farm. Madeleine sprang to her feet, then, with a dab at her eyes, and a brusque, "Yes, it's time we were getting home." And as the old black gig trailed across the cobbles of the square behind the old white horse, she turned her head to say: "You must come and see us again soon." That was the only thanks Skene got.

CHAPTER VIII

The Day of Rest

THE company was in Brigade Reserve —not even so far back as the camp in the wood. They were to be quartered in Dead Dog Farm, just out of bullet range, but within that of the field guns, and were advised not to walk about in the daylight. There was no fear of that—they would go up at four-thirty every afternoon to dig; besides, the artillery dug-outs in the cellar had several feet of brick rubble over them which meant that they hadn't been abandoned without good reason.

On the first night, at ten o'clock, the company tumbled in from the relief which had been taking place since five. By the help of two candle stumps the officers saw the men under shelter. Their swelling chorus of songs, oaths, thumps and clatter of rifles and equipment, while they got their hot tea from the cooker in the yard, died

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away into snores. There was no digging that night.

The morning dawned grey and thick with fog. Skene and Thomas went round the place to see what could be done with it as a billet.

It reminded Skene of Spanish Farm. It was, in fact, another of that chain of farm-fortresses left by Alva, three hundred years ago. On three sides of an enormous midden, the red brick buildings towered up, solid as when built—badly holed by the Bosche, but hanging together still. On the fourth side stood a short tower thirty feet high, and so solid that a 4 in. howitzer shell had not destroyed the whole of it. They were just returning, when a mounted officer clattered under the arch of the gateway and dismounted beside them.

Was it credible that there could exist anything so clean and bright as that officer? Cap, well-shaven face, raincoat, field boots, shining spurs, black metal cross—ah! the Padre from Brigade. Thomas, the public-schoolboy, covered his astonishment, called a man to take the horse, and asked the Padre to breakfast as if he had been expecting him for months. "Why, of course," thought Skene, "it's Sunday!"

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For so long, Sunday had meant nothing more than any other day. An hour later the four platoons filed along the cobbles to the big barn.

The fog was dense, the front quiet. There was nothing to fear from observation. Thomas and Skene considered the danger of having so many men together in a confined space, but agreed to risk it. The only light came through the upper half of the great doors—the light of a wet Flemish winter—and fell on shaven heads and newly brushed khaki, freshly shined leather and brass. The Sergeants distributed little paper hymn-books. The Padre produced a surplice from his haversack and put it on in a corner, and Skene was perversely reminded of a girl he had known, years before, who, after hours of shining nudity, would suddenly get up, turn her back, and slip on a nothing of linen and lace with just such an action.

The hymns the Padre had chosen were good and old. Skene amused himself by picking out from amongst the men the well-trained little village choir boys. The singing ceased. The young Padre was speaking; what he said appeared simple, sincere, sensible. The men, heartened by having opened their chests in sing-

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ing, were listening, absolutely still. Skene's mind wandered. That young Corporal by the door, with the light on his clean features and cropped head, the healthy sheen of his flesh against the deep brown of the barn, might be out of a Flemish picture—a Van Dyck. Somewhere a man snored—and with the sound the picture changed to a Hals or a Jordaens.

Did those old painters, who lived in the midst of wars as brutal as this one, draw inspiration from the tremendous emotions of their time? And should we see, in our generation, art rise to equal heights? Or was fine art sent wandering from heaven, like the wind, to descend only on the unconscious!

But everybody was bending head and shoulders. The young Padre was praying now. Direct and simple, asking that they might keep before them the high purpose which had brought them together to do their duty in a strange land, whatever might be the consequences. But Skene thought of young Murdon and Bolton, the boy-Corporal, and suddenly felt he wanted to cry. The young Padre started another hymn, and gave them benediction. The men filed out.

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Divested of his surplice the Padre was cheerful, obviously hungry. He would stay to lunch. Thomas went over to Brigade. Skene entertained the guest. The mess orderly had got pork chops from goodness knew where, a tin of beans from the canteen, a bottle of French beer, there was ration cheese and shamrock "butter." And the Padre produced a flask of canteen port.

After lunch, Skene, and the young Padre who volunteered his help, sat smoking in that ancient basement, smelling of pigeons and rats and old age, and turning over on the greasy "table" the letters home of nearly two hundred men, which had to be censored and sent down that night.

Such letters home—letters to parents mostly! Some to children—the longest of course to sweethearts—some well written—nearly all affectionate—some obscene like the simple classic, "Dear Mother, This war is a b. . . . Tell Auntie!" About them all was the curious anonymity of letters whose writers are forbidden to say where they are, what doing. Skene looked for the crude pothooks of his own servant, fearing that the fellow's loquacity, fortified by the extra leisure and liquor of officers' servants, might have

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prompted some effusion that would get him into trouble. What he found, however, was this, with the spelling corrected:

"DEAR WIFE,—

"Hope you are well and keeping your heart up. Give my love to the kiddies. And do keep your heart up. That's a rum 'un, old Mrs. . . . being dead. Mind you ask her girl Alice for some of the potatoes if they are not going to keep them. And keep your heart up. Now I must close. Your loving husband,

"JERRY.

"Somewhere in France.

"Love to my kiddies."

Slowly the pile of cheap envelopes diminished. Presently they were gone. Skene and the young Padre faced each other in the candle-lit dusk. The latter was flushed. "The men are splendid!" he said. But on Skene had already descended the irritable mood which used to come to the most hardened, when about to leave such meagre comfort and safety as they had in billets, for the misery and danger of the trenches.

"We get used to it," he said.

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"One is glad the spiritual fires are burning so brightly, a good augury for after the War!"

On the tip of Skene's tongue was the retort he had made the week before to an Engineer officer about the siting of some dug-outs. "You may know a lot about trenches, but we have to live in them!" But he looked at the young Padre's clean pink face. "After all," he thought, "he might easily have stayed at home!" and said instead: "There won't be many left for after the War—at our present rate of going on—it's rather an expensive education, isn't it?"

"I fear so, I fear so! At any rate those who fall have the satisfaction of knowing that they have done their duty!"

An eternity of satisfaction! Skene replied: "Let's hope so!"

"Well, now I must be going. I shall have tea at Brigade. Is there anything I can send you?"

"The men are always grateful for novels and cigarettes."

"Comforts them—what?"

"Prevents them thinking. Good night."

The Padre clattered out into the dusk. "Tea, sir!" said Jerry the servant at his elbow. He drank it, reading "Tristram Shandy." He was

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roused by his Sergeant-major: "Company ready to move off, sir!"

Pulling on his gear he sallied from the farm at the head of that procession.

That night he lost four men from shrapnel and two from machine-gun fire. Sunday!

CHAPTER IX

Stands England where she did?

WHO that ever had such a thing can forget his first English leave? That leave, which came after months of waiting, and was often despaired of—for it was not then the usual thing it afterwards became—those eight days which seemed to promise an eternity of leisured comfort. Towards such bliss, Skene, like everyone else, travelled slowly and with difficulty. Relieved from his command in the support line, he had a mile or so to walk across the open, past the dump, and along the shell-swept road, until, near the bank of the canal, he was lucky enough to find some regimental transport, returning to the horse-lines. He took the Sergeant's horse and, pushing ahead, found old Adams in his "Armstrong" hut, and shared the old man's nightcap whisky, under the Bosche midnight salvo flying over their heads. Then, buttoning close his British-warm, and commending his valise to the old soldier's care, he stumbled

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through the darkness, down the remaining mile and a half of camp-surrounded pavé to the station. This was before the days of rest-houses and officers' clubs, and he slept sitting on his pack, against the sandbags of the R.T.O.'s office, until a freak train, made up with Belgian, French and English carriages, rolled dissolutely in. Flinging himself into the nearest first-class compartment, he slept until the bitter morning rain, blowing through a broken window, awoke him between Calais and Boulogne. Around him on the seats and floor lay half-a-dozen other officers, whom he had never seen before. His grumble at the length and slowness of the journey was answered: "Ever been by Havre? No? By Golly, you should go by Havre!" Luckily Skene had biscuits and chocolate and some one had some coffee and rum in a Thermos, for it was eleven o'clock of a grey, drizzling morning when they stretched their stiffened limbs on the platform at Bologne, and were promptly captured by a Military Landing Officer who took their warrants and gave them "duty" tickets for the boat. Too green, then, to "dodge" obligations of this kind, too keen, perhaps, to wish to, and much in awe of the limping captain with the D.S.O. who gave

the orders—"base-port people" had not yet become an alien and hatred race—Skene spent the two hours crossing in charge of the port side of the main deck, and did not really feel free until he emerged through the portals of Victoria Station. He had travelled up with two homeless Englishmen who had hurried from the West Indies to enlist. They were going to dine at a restaurant and see if they couldn't "pick something up" at a music-hall. Skene sent a telegram and took a taxi to a northern terminus and caught the night train to his home. He slept the whole four hours. Clouds were racing over the bright moon till the very Cathedral spire seemed in motion, when he let himself into the Cathedral close and put his key into the latch of his uncle's house. They had remained faithful to him then—all these familiar things! He switched on the light in the low, wide, polished old hall—and instantly felt for his revolver—coming to meet him was a red-eyed, shorn fellow in a greasy collar and British-warm, nondescript cap and sodden puttees. It was his own reflection in the mirror—what a brute he looked—red, coarsened, broadened! The old mirror, that had reflected him a thousand times, told him the

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truth as no human being would have done; and stuck in it was a note: "Dear Geoffrey, I have gone to bed. There is some hot milk in the Thermos. Uncle." . . . Milk!

Morning! O taste of the first cup of English-made tea. O first bath in a real white enamelled bath with unlimited hot and cold water. Having shaved at leisure, and breakfasted bloatedly under the admiring eyes of housemaid and housekeeper, Skene sauntered out. He first met one Sharpley, in the local bank, who had not enlisted, and kept him talking, till the reluctant wretch, who was perfectly fit, and of military age, but who wanted to "get on," stammered: "Of course, I can't go, we're so shorthanded!" He next met the stumping Captain Bittern, who had left a leg at Mons, and was greeted as a brother officer, before all the world. Then came a glass of sherry with Griggs the wine merchant, who had known him "as a leetle, totty boy—and now look at ye," then a tearful blessing from an unknown old lady, who *would* shake his hand because she had lost "her boy" in the trenches. It was nearly mid-day before he turned the corner of the Chapter House and stood before his uncle's office, with its brass plate, "Diocesan Architect and Sur-

veyor.” There was the bald head and the toothless mouth of old Hanson, his uncle’s clerk, quavering out: “Well, if it isn’t Master Geoffrey come back from the War—what will the Gov’nor say?” as if he had stepped out of the pages of Anthony Trollope or Bulwer Lytton.

And here was his uncle—that genial, decorous person, who had been father and mother and tutor to him, with the beautiful white hair and rosy cheeks, in the leisured tidiness of that office, where the architectural drawings gleamed out from the neutral-tinted lincrusta—was it all a sort of play?

War had not touched the people at home. Lighting regulations, recruiting, daily casualty lists—it hadn’t really touched them. And if it hadn’t, what would? “Well, Geoffrey, my boy!” And then a tale of who had been born, married or died during his absence within the little friendly circle of The Close. “So-and-so has done so-and-so—ah! but you wouldn’t know him, he’s in the town. . . . Mrs. Someone’s son Lionel has got a commission, and went to France on the 14th; I don’t know if you met him!”

“I can’t say I have, Uncle; you see, there are over a million and a half of us there!”

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"Just so, just so! And now, my dear boy, do tell me what it is like, your letters don't give us much . . . data!"

"No, you see we have strict censorship!"

"Quite! Quite! I suppose it is very terrible."

"It's like—like——" How could he find words, in that quiet room, for the barren maze of putrid water and ragged wire—for the formless misery and roystering leisure of billets! "It's like the end of the world!"

"My dear Geoffrey! Well, I suppose so!"

His uncle demanded no further explanation. He had more engrossing things on his mind. They walked home to lunch. There were cutlets and stewed rhubarb. No cream: "Wartime, Geoffrey. We all feel it."

The days passed. They passed in visits to his tailor, his old school, his uncle's friends. His own friends were either gone, or, as he now felt, worse than gone. He did not want to see those who had stayed behind. He felt uncertain as to whether he made them feel awkward, but certain that they made him feel so; the seventh day came. He had to go up to town in the afternoon, to be in time for the boat train, judiciously

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arranged so as to start at an hour at which all men are sober. His uncle sitting opposite him at lunch (roast beef and apple tart) ventured: "Well, my dear boy, the sooner it's over the better. I shall want you when we get really busy with the memorials—there'll be a lot!"

Skene agreed. They parted at the station with a handshake. What his uncle thought none can tell.

In town, he had a hot bath and a good dinner, not knowing when he would have either again, and strolled into a music-hall, having no one in London to see and nowhere else to go. In that unreal maze of mirrors, plush seats and gilding he felt curiously detached. The allurements of the place, the promiscuous pleasures, that lay ready enough to the hands of young officers on leave, did not allure him somehow. He was far from realizing as yet the bleak certainty of illness, breakdown, wounds, eventual death that lay before an Infantry officer. The crowd cheered him up. He felt that the country was putting up a good show for war-time. He felt a cheerful compassion for all these women, chased out of Belgian watering-places under circumstances he could well imagine. Two-thirds of the

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men were in uniform, and mostly junior to him—he sympathized with them no less. By the bar a young officer, trying to converse in broken French with an over-dressed elderly woman, cannoned against him and apologized. It was Wheather, the Signal Officer, just drunk enough. He hailed Skene with effusion. “I tell her I will go up the golden stairs,” he pointed to the ornate stairway leading up from the bar, “but she won’t let me.”

The lady pounced on Skene as an ally; she was hardly less drunk, but more used to it. What claim she made on Wheather—an introduction she had given him, or a room he had hired from her—Skene couldn’t make out. Her French, he judged, was inferior to his own, and she would not accept his polite intimation that his friend was tired, and he was going to see him home. Instead she stuck to Wheather’s arm, and impounded Skene’s, who dare not withdraw it for fear that she should fall. And together the three gyrated, to the amusement of the world, but not to Skene’s. A commissionaire said with a grin: “Now, sir, we must clear, if you please!” In the crush that followed, Skene, separated from Wheather, was anchored on the stone curb, by

this elderly lady in loud clothes, dragging on his arm and stuttering in rapid, mutilated French, "malade—malade à en crever—sick enough to bust myself."

"Taxi, sir?" said the grinning commissionaire. Skene nodded.

The vehicle slid up, the old lady collapsed. "All right, sir, shove her in; I know her!" said the driver. Skene shoved her in and got in behind, holding up the poor old bones and lolling head as best he could. The machine stopped with a whirr at the doorway of an establishment against which nothing could be said so far as appearances went. A porter in uniform called a maid from an upper flat; Skene delivered the old lady to them without remark and received no thanks. Returning to the taxi he drove to his hotel. On getting out he asked his driver:

"Who was that person?" "Well, sir, we calls her 'skinny Lizzie.' She often goes home like that. Don't get enough to eat, they say, since the War!"

Skene went up to brush off the scent and powder.

Morning was breaking grey, in that grey place, Victoria Station, when he picked his way among

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men sleeping on the asphalt pavement, and women weeping against anything that gave them semblance of shelter. Dodging and pushing, he got his boat ticket, found the Pullman breakfast car, and cast his pack upon a seat.

Half-past six of a winter's morning strikes chilly on an empty stomach, however healthy. Skene stamped his feet, in the cold and sodden twilight that the shaded lamplight eked out into the dawn under the sooty girders. Around him, officers whose relatives had come to see them off were trying to look anywhere but at those women's faces, so brave, so white, so strained. Skene thanked his God that he had no one. Across on the platform where the rank and file were boarding their separate train, emotion was allowed fuller vent, the atmosphere was easier. There, stout buxom mothers, and pale neat mothers, trim or draggled sisters, sweethearts, wives, and some few who were none of these, were clinging and crying to their hearts' content—and the men, a few painfully sober and earnest, but most jolly, or just recovered from jollity, elbowed their way into the carriages and began to sing.

An eddying movement round the carriages of his own train, a closing of doors, caused Skene

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to seek his place. The train moved, gently, noiselessly. Strained faces turned away; a rustling of newspapers, in a dead silence—the men's train, and its "Are we downhearted?" dropping behind in the grey suburbs. And, oddly, as the speed increased, and the last suburb yielded to the parklands of Kent, and the first gruff small talk of Englishmen ashamed of their emotions began, Skene felt his spirits rising.

Opposite to him an R.E. officer yawned and sat up, with ends of hair straggling over his bleared eyes. It was Wheather.

Each of them said "Hallo!" and sat silent.

Presently Wheather leant across the breakfast table and said: "Lend me some money!"

Skene did so. "Thanks," said Wheather. "Where the devil did I see you, Skene?" Skene reminded him. "Hoh! It was a muddle. You see, before the War I used to know a little party in a shop, you know, in the West End. I wrote and told her to meet me on leave. She used to wear a decent black dress, an' a little hat, and looked just all right—looked like what she was. I used to take her to the Palace, and they never said a word. When she met me, on leave, my word, you should have seen her. The first eve-

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ning cost me a little short of ten quid—why, we used to go to the pictures and have supper, and the whole go was about thirty bob! I was so tight I don't know how I got out of her flat. I had to go home, of course, and see my people that day, but I arranged to meet her again last night. She was a bigger swell than ever. She'd had trouble with her landlord, and wanted to come to my hotel. But I said, 'My dear girl, I've booked my room and that sort of thing isn't done.' 'Oh, I'll get a chaperone and take a room with her,' she says, 'and be your fiancée and sling the lead like anything with the office.' So she produced the old girl as a chaperone, and by that time I was tight again, and she turned up rotten and went off. An' then I saw you, an' comin' out I got collared by another girl in a taxi, who swore I'd kept her waiting."

The waiter passed. "Here, get me some more coffee—hot—an' never mind the sugar.

"I got so fearfully mixed up I didn't know where I was. Another girl, another flat. Everything else the same. She got me up at half-past five, gave me some sort of breakfast, and pushed me out like a good 'un. I got here somehow.

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But one of them had been through my pockets. My case was gone and the return half of my leave warrant stuck in here—breast pocket—loose!”

Skene laughed and thought: “What a beastly mess!” And everything seemed false and artificial—his guardian’s offices—these ladies and their flats! Well, he was going back to something—real!

Folkestone! The train slid down to the quay. The sharp air stung his nostrils. Thank God the flood was at full—no waiting. Outside the pier the wave-caps were white and the destroyer convoy circled sharply black against the grey. Tramp and bustle as the leave boats swung at their moorings, flapping of ropes and gulls’ wings, roar of steam cranes and shouting.

Skene pushed his way well forward. He suddenly realized that he was glad, actually glad to be going back. He felt as if he were going home, leaving behind a certain comfort of body and leisure of mind, but leaving, too, something that he felt to be false—the complacency of that Cathedral town—the silly waste of the night in London. He was going back to discomfort, hardship, danger, death perhaps, but he was going

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—he felt—to where anyone with a spark of manhood ought to be, fighting this war to an end, cutting a clean line with the past, and making a fresh start possible, to a better future.

CHAPTER X

The Waging of War

THE year 1915 closed, dark and wet, and 1916 opened, dark and wetter still. For six weeks the battalion was never completely out of the line, the digging and carrying was incessant. An attack of trench fever took Skene to the casualty clearing station for a fortnight. He returned to his battalion in mid-March just as snow was beginning to fall. The officers were billeted just then in a half-demolished windmill, while the men were in the outbuildings. Skene sat there one bleak afternoon, writing in his Field Message book letter after letter. They were all the same. There were so many that he used his carbon sheet to duplicate them.

"In the field.

March, 1916.

"DEAR

"I very much regret to inform you that your

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(son)
(husband) was (killed) in action on the
(brother) (missing)

He was very popular with his comrades, who will feel his loss severely. He was a good soldier and liked by his officers. As soon as possible a cross will be erected, bearing his name, etc., on the spot where he laid down his life for his country.

“Yours faithfully,
“G. SKENE, Lt.”

After filling in the names, he addressed the envelopes, some to sooty streets of the northern mining and industrial towns—some to the big estates and farms of the southern side of the county, some to the salt-smelling alleys or villa rows of the east-coast ports and watering-places. It was considered a duty in the battalion to write to next-of-kin, so that the bald official announcement was not the only last message they received. But it was becoming difficult to keep up with the ever-increasing list. Sometimes the platoon officer and N.C.O. both figured in it, and the rest of the company did what they could. Often, no trace could be found of men who perished in

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direct hits by big shell. Skene regarded it as the only tribute he could pay to men who shared the life with him, but had not his luck. He was only responsible for his own platoon, at most for his company. But the casualties did not end there. The Colonel had been killed by so many machine-gun bullets that his head was demolished. A bad business! Skene remembered how in his trench he had heard the Colonel's firm step, splashing along on coming his round, his heavy breathing as he climbed over a smashed-in traverse—the deep voice:

“Mornin’, Skene!”

“Good morning, sir!”

“All right?”

“Two men hit, on rations, sir!”

“Ah! Be glad when we can get some of our own back?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Anything special?”

“No, sir.”

“I’m going along to see Andrews. Straight ahead?”

“Yes, sir, but turn to the right down the ‘S’ lines: the way to the left is all broken up and it’s enfiladed. Shall I send a guide?”

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"Not necessary. Good day!"

"Good day, sir!"

He had passed on, tall, long-striding, followed by his orderly. And the grey morning had broken with the usual crescendo of enemy machine-gun fire. Skene sent a Corporal to see that all his men were standing-to and getting the fires in the braziers past the smoky stage before the Bosche could see the smoke. He was in good spirits, because the end of his watch was near, and Jerry, his servant, was preparing his steaming tin of porridge (Mansfield insisted on porridge, in the trenches: "It makes a sort of buffer on the tummy, and when one falls flat, to avoid fire, one falls soft")—he would swallow it, soused in condensed milk and rum, then crawl into a filthy hole and sleep, while the bullets thumped the parapet. And suddenly the Colonel's orderly had appeared before him, shaking and saying: "Oh, sir! Oh, sir!"

Skene went with him to look, keeping well down at the broken parapet where the "S" lines branched off. There lay Colonel Gilford, full length, his feet sticking up stiffly, his head unrecognizable. All the orderly could say was, "I told 'im, sir, I told 'im!" Skene quite

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understood. The Colonel was known to be obtusely brave. He could not easily read a map and was stubborn before suggestions. It took hours to work a stretcher to where he lay, and another twenty-four hours before his long form could be carried out and buried, near Brigade Head-quarters, more than a mile back. So perished Colonel Gilford—and his iron imperturbability.

The next officer to go had been young Murdon. That was another sort of story. Young Murdon—Skene could never help being rather nice to him because it was so obvious that the Major and Thomas and the others regarded him with suspicion. For instance, in arranging the tours of duty in the company (always under-officered) Thomas would always give the easy ones to Murdon—taking the harder and more dangerous for himself, Skene or Earnshaw. The latter spoke out to Skene when they were alone. The kid was no good, just an ordinary funk! Not long after that they were in brigade reserve—a mile or two back from the trenches, going up every night to dig or carry, as now. Murdon simply couldn't be missed out of that. Thomas went the first night, Earnshaw the next, and

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Skene the next. The fourth night Skene, crossing the yard of the warehouse where they were billeted, in a shell-out village, saw the party paraded under the N.C.O., the men standing as they do when they know their time is being wasted, and the N.C.O.s talking together in a group. He went into the mess-room and met Thomas's eye.

"Very late getting off, aren't they?"

"Pretty late!" said Skene. The murmur of talk and the fidgety stamping of the men increased.

Thomas looked at his watch. "Where's Murdon?" he said.

"I'll go and see!" Skene went to the hoppress where the officers' valises lay side by side. He had to strike a light. There was Murdon sure enough, his head in his hands, queer sounds in his breathing.

"Aren't you well?—your party's waiting."

"Oh, Skene, don't let them send me—I shall be killed, I know I shall, I dream about it!"

Skene pulled on his boots and goatskin, mackintosh and equipment with the speed taught by many a cramped awakening in the dark. "You lie still!" he called over his shoulder, and ran

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across the yard, shoving his torch and revolver into place.

"All present, Sergeant Evans? Right-in-file; lead out on to the road!" He put his head into the mess: "Murdon isn't feeling well; I'll take his lot to-night!"

Thomas grunted. This sort of thing couldn't go on long. It didn't. The battalion had four days' divisional rest at railhead. Murdon seemed happy, took Skene out to dinner and to the Follies, where the red-nosed comedian used to interrupt the serious songs with, "Did you want to buy a dug-out?" and eight hundred officers and men sang the chorus, "There's something in the sea-side air!"

Now, it was that period of the war when white-moustached old gentlemen used to say, "The men are getting soft, sir!" or "The Bosche want ginger-ing up, they're laughing at us!" To remedy these evils, some one who didn't live in the trenches invented trench mortars and trench raids. Those who lived in the Line, still keen, as many were, on an offensive, still dreaming of the rush that was only to stop at Berlin—knew that the only possible policy for the side weaker in artillery and machine-guns was to keep quiet until

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a real offensive might have some effect. But the London papers, the political situation, and the professional soldiers who had never fought, had it their own way. Curious little brass instruments (it was before Stokes invented his simple and sufficient mortar) were carried up to the Line and allowed to have their shoot and depart. The Bosche simply blew the place where they had been to pieces, and the Infantry who lived there lost their sleep and food and many of their lives. The raids were more successful. The pugnacity of the individual Briton and his exasperation found their vent. Twice Skene took out three or four men, exchanged rifle-shot and bomb with the Bosche, tried to take a prisoner or machine-gun. Each time wire, or swamp, or the instinct of his men, selected from the poachers, rat-catchers and horse-slaughterers of his company, to kill at sight or touch, had prematurely spoiled the game, and he had come back into his own lines, soaking wet and somewhat flustered, but more and more confident that the individual German was afraid of him. This time, when the battalion went back to the Line, Skene was told to take young Murdon and selected men and find out what the Bosche were building at C. 29. (It

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subsequently turned out to be the first pill-box of concrete, but the idea was shelved during the Verdun offensive.)

Skene himself always felt shaky, until he had fairly started—and the look in young Murdon's eyes affected him so that he offered Thomas to go alone. "No," said Thomas, the Major (now commanding) had noticed young Murdon, and said he must get used to it. They went out in the old "diamond" formation then in vogue, cut some wire, lay still while flares went up, and machine-guns rattled over their heads—then, Skene and a Lance-corporal, busy scraping and probing of the hump of earth they had to explore, in the light of a flare, saw men with tin hats (the English had no steel helmets then) all round them. Instinctively he squeezed his heavy "Colt" once—twice—thrice—ducked and slid off the parapet, while a rifle went off in his ear and another in his face. Shouts and running, silence and darkness. Surely some one still running behind him! His Corporal, on whom he had fallen, was making a gurgling noise—was he hit? No, spitting out liquid mud. The Bosche had given the alarm. The whole field of No-man's Land was laced and perforated with traversing

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machine-gun fire, and salvos of whizzbangs crashed and scattered over the trenches. Nothing to be done for minutes that seemed hours, but lie quite flat and still. Then, face to rank grass and stinking ooze, Skene and the Corporal found some of the party and turned them crawling homeward, to that slantwise gap in the wire where Thomas was waiting to take from his hand, as he slid into comparative safety, any weapon, accoutrement or other spoil, to be sent to "Brigade" for inspection. Perhaps no exhilaration on earth will ever be again like that of crouching in a dug-out over hot black tea, gritty with sugar and stinging with rum. Between mouthfuls of an enormous bully sandwich, Skene, his eyelids nearly closing over shining eyes, told Thomas how the "show" had fared. Thomas nodded.

"Well, you couldn't do any more. I'll put a report in. You sent young Murdon to Headquarters?"

"No!"

"Where is he then?"

"He was rearmost; must have come in first!"

"Did you see him?"

"No, I was t'other end. Sent Sergeant Evans to tell him!"

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"All right. You get a sleep. I'll go and see!"

"I say, Thomas, you don't think he's . . . ?"

"I'll just go and make sure. So long!"

Skene rolled over and slept. He awoke with a start.

"Stand to!" Thomas was sitting beside him smoking, caked in mud from head to foot.

Skene squelched as he turned, shivering as men shiver nowhere as in Flanders: "Hullo! You've been out!"

"Only as far as young Murdon!"

Amid all that cheerfully accepted horror, a fresh special horror grew on Skene's face, as Thomas told him. So far as could be made out, young Murdon had rushed back at the first shot, not obliquely, up the alley in the English wire, to safety, but straight on to the wire, and been caught in it, opposite the communication trench where the Bosche machine-guns sprayed all night and day.

"You know the big crump-hole, right in our ditch. Well, he was hit more than once, but one had paralysed him and he slipped in there. We were after him until dawn, he was moaning all the time and shrieking when we touched him.

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We tried all ways to get him out and fed him with stuff; he got quieter bit by bit!"

"Do you think he's snuffed it?"

"Can't say, couldn't stop to look. Had to come in when it got light. It was a miracle we lost no one, as it was. We'll try again to-night!"

"The Bosche will do him in before then."

"Don't think they can see, if he keeps still and quiet!"

Skene passed a miserable day, and was over the parapet and down the wire the moment it was safe. Young Murdon was lying back, with outstretched arms, as if crucified. His open eyes, however, had not the orthodox expression. Skene was hardly sorry when, after hours of building a "float" with pickets and boards, and gradually raising him in four men's arms, he died on the stretcher before he reached the dressing station. The men kept away from the place, during all that tour of duty. They never said why, but however carefully Thomas or Skene spaced them out, the two bays by the grump-hole at the mouth of the communication trench were always empty. No one would stay there.

And, as the Colonel and young Murdon had gone, so the men went, one by one. The ir-

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repressible boy who played the mouth-organ was killed by a falling house—tons of masonry on his limber, fair-skinned body. They never got to him, Skene had to rely on what his comrades remembered for his next-of-kin. The hoarse-voiced Sergeant, Strood, a fish-hawker, was killed outright by shrapnel, on a ration party. The Salvationist, who would sing hymns while wiring, got a “stray” through the chest, and lay on the stretcher loudly exclaiming, “Glory be to God, I’m dying, I know I am, Glory be to God!” New men came and disappeared—those on whom shells fell directly, so that no trace of them was ever found, were posted “missing.” So was one who went mad and was found cooking for a railway section, miles back, harmless, and insisting he had been sent there. They passed so fast that Skene needed a list from which to write his letter to their next-of-kin, in the half-demolished mill, by the snow-glare on the ceiling. March it was now; he had not been “out” six months, and half the battalion had changed. . . .

He glanced up at a whirring sound, fearing a long-distance shot. He was wrong. The low aperture through which he was looking out was filled by the bonnet and front wheels of a Staff

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car that had slid half round to its brakes on the greasy surface. Enter Captain Castle, huger than usual in furs, brisker and more tonic than ever, a personality that laughed at circumstance. At once the low brick vaulting rang with his cheery energy. Thousands of yards of white material were wanted to make shifts for the men out on patrol, in case the snow "lay." Skene was to go with the Ordnance Officer and interpreter to the nearest towns of any size beyond railhead and purchase every inch he could lay hands on. Three minutes later, Skene and the interpreter were being rushed through the keen air towards railhead. There they picked up the Deputy Assistant Director of Ordnance Stores, known to friends as D.A.D.O.S., of the Nth Division.

Their quest took them far afield. At dusk of the following day, they saw the first consignment of the white material unloaded at the Division Laundry, where in a dismantled brewery sempstresses would make it up into the smocks. It seemed a pity the job was over, it was a relief from the futureless monotony of company routine. Dados said:

"Well, you chaps have helped me no end, and

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I suppose I'm safe for the M.C. over this, so we'll have champagne."

They had it, such as it was, with the gusto and in the quantity proper to men whose next drink may be poured out by Lazarus.

Out presently in the snow-lit dusk, watching the chauffeur laboriously start up the car, the champagne gave Skene an idea: why not go back by Spanish Farm? Dados was indifferent. Mercadet, the interpreter, smiled indulgently. They left the Calais-Bethune road and turned east, eight kilometres along the Courtrai road. With much barking of dogs and opening of heavy gates, they got the car into the yard. A light was shining from the kitchen. Madeleine, standing by the stove, smiled.

Skene went straight across to her. He wished to be sympathetic, if her young man was dead, hopeful if he was alive. "*Ça ne va pas trop mal?*" he began.

"I am always waiting; in a month or two I shall know, I suppose."

And that was all Skene could get out of her. She and her married sister, a bigger darker woman, who was a refugee, with her little daughter, made omelettes of the usual level

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excellence, one of the old bottles was brought out and a hare paté, garlicky and gamey, in an earthenware jar. Dados became excited, played with the child, calling himself "cochon" when he meant "cocher"; Mercadet's eyes ran with cold and wine; Skene drank and gazed at Madeleine. One might die to-morrow, meanwhile one would live.

The studded wheels ground over the frozen snow, the old house was left dimly outlined in the luminous night, and in the bright open doorway the family waved them adieu.

"And very nice, too," said Dados. "He does know where to find them, doesn't he, Mercadet!" From the depths of his wraps the Frenchman answered: "Ah, Skene, you know, is one of those ones!"

The more Skene protested the more they laughed at him, till Dados, overcome by high living and low temperature, went to sleep with his head rolling in the high collar of his British-warm. Mercadet, nudging Skene, said: "You have done him well, and amused him, my friend; now we shall never be short of stores in the brigade."

Skene growled.

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"I wish I hadn't amused him so much! Nice yarn he'll make of this!"

"Quite so, mon cher, and very much to your credit. They will say you are no end of a boy for the girls."

"Look here, Mercadet, leave the beastly girl out of it!"

"Oh, no! Not at all beastly."

"Good Lord, man! She's got a chap of her own."

"Yes, yes, the one you enquired after so tenderly, when we went to the French Headquarters."

"I only tried to find out what had happened to him; haven't you any sympathy, you old sinner?"

"Yes, plenty of sympathy, but I have two sons older than you, and both dead. And I can tell you all you want to know about him."

"Mercadet, are you a liar, or merely a prophet?"

But Skene never found out. The car skidded under pressure of the brakes. Skene and Mercadet peered out. A square, stumpy figure, all British-warm and field boots, was holding up a hand. "Are you going near C. 21?"

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"Hullo, Earnshaw, what are you up to?" Earnshaw climbed in and squashed down between them: "Let me introduce you. Lootenant Earnshaw—Dados. His real name is Mills. He's the man who grows grenades!"

"I've been buying bricks!" said the serious Earnshaw.

"What, to build a bridge over the Bosche?"

"For horse-standings! Do you fellows realize the quantity of animals we're losing?"

Skene was a townsman and had little to do with animals, but he was English, and had scruples about beasts.

"Bravo, Earnshaw, well done!"

Dados was not so sentimental. His professional dignity was hurt.

"What bricks? How did you pay?"

Earnshaw nodded. "In that brick yard behind the pub. Gave the old chap a requisition, as soon as I'd seen them on to the lorries—empty ration lorries!"

"My word!" gasped Dados, "you'll get yourself into trouble over this!"

"I don't think so. It's common sense. Horses and mules must have something firm, and reasonably hard and dry, under their feet, Divisional

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H.Q. ought to be grateful. I've told 'em twice, and now I've saved them the trouble!"

"You'd better send back your bricks, and recover and tear up your requisition, as you call it. You're not entitled to give it!"

"Well, the Field Pocket Book says I am—anyhow, the bricks are down in my horse-lines, and my section are cementing 'em in with plaster from the house at the railway!"

"You'd better get transferred in a hurry——"
Dados began.

"Oh, go to hell!"

"I wash my hands of it. Well, here we are! Good night, gentlemen!" The car had stopped by Brigade Head-quarters.

Half-melted snow still hung about the road and the yard of the mill, as Skene and Earnshaw stepped out into it, very cheerful. Skene had had a holiday—forty-eight hours, and was full of drink; Earnshaw had had an argument.

"These Divisional Head-quarters Wallahs don't know there's a war on."

"No," said Skene; "I tried to tell 'em about the trenches!"

"This is plain common sense. I should like to see 'em object!"

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They stumbled over Thomas's legs in the loft where their valises were spread. He said sleepily,

"Hope you've enjoyed yourselves!"

Skene loosened his collar, kicked off wet boots, and wound his watch—his toilet for the night. "Ungrateful brute," he said; "I've been working hard to save you from being shot as a dark moving object on white snow!"

"Oh, well, we shall be dark, moving objects at six Ack Emma; the Brigadier's coming to address us on the harassing tactics."

"He ought to know, the blighter!" grunted Earnshaw, folding his overcoat to make a pillow.

Skene sat up suddenly among his blankets; something had crunched in his pocket as he burrowed. He felt and found the letters to the next-of-kin, that ought to have been posted two days before.

"Oh well!" he thought, rolled over, and slept.

CHAPTER XI

The Divisional Show

AT last the division went out of the Line to rest. Rest—what that word used to mean! It was a fine dry April, and even Flanders, whose colour and shapes are generally woolly and gawky and wet, had for a few days the clear joyfulness of Italy. The division trailed back—in those days divisions moved as a whole—not merely to railhead and its adjacent camps, but far into an unknown hinterland. It passed among budding trees and flowering bushes beautiful with that queer stiffness, as of heraldic symbols, peculiar to spring. Each morning, with steadily rising spirits, the battalion set out, clean, fresh and properly fed, from billets showing less and less the wear and tear of war; each evening it settled down in lengthening twilight among peaceful farms and villages, where the glass was still in the windows, and the towers on the churches. After about a week they

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halted at Hondebecq, just where the Pas de Calais slopes down to the Flanders flats. A typical village through which the paved Rue Nationale from Paris to Dunkirk ran from south to north, the equally important road from Bethune and St. Omer to Lille crossed from west to east. The cross-roads made the Place, whose whole north-east corner was filled by the high-shouldered hump-backed church, chiming a hymn tune every quarter of an hour, and whose south-west corner was filled by the stone-fronted, round-gabled inn "Lion of Flanders." In peace-time it was the weekly meeting-place of Belgian horse-jobbers, and hop and flax merchants; now, with the War only twenty kilometres to the east, it had become the nearest available restaurant for officers of the resting battalions.

Before this estaminet, that fine Easter Sunday morning, Skene, with a gunner officer called Wellin, gave their horses to a small boy. They had ridden in to enter their respective units' teams for the Divisional Horse Show. From the opened west doors of the church, to the music of the organ, came a procession of little girls in white, and of little boys in blue suits with peaked caps, carrying sprays of the first flowering bushes

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and followed by priest and beadle, mayor and schoolmaster, and members of the societies for good works that abound in the devout and wealthy parishes of the north.

Skene was trying to drive some comprehension of all this into the bullet head of Wellin, when a voice said in his ear:

"Good morning, Mis-ter Skene." It was Madeleine Vanderlynden.

During all these months of dangerous duty the thought of Madeleine had always been remotely comforting to Skene, reminiscent of ease and rest, a change of scene and diet, a spot of pleasant colour and an echo of civilized conversation. Now he felt almost proprietary—confronted by this carefully dressed, well-looking Madeleine, explaining in more or less fluent English that she had taken over the restaurant of the "Lion of Flanders." He hated Wellin's prominent eyes surveying her from top to toe.

"What about having a little grub here, Skene, after the horse show to-morrow?" Wellin was saying.

"I shall be getting back."

"Well, I'm going to, anyhow!"

"All right, then, I'll come."

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They arranged to take a table for four and make up a party. Wellin proposed Wheather, the signaller, and Skene old Mercadet. Au revoired, in Madeleine's best English, they went across to Head-quarters. Riding back to their respective billets, between brown tilth where, as yet, no green was showing, Wellin said:

"I go off here. See you to-morrow! She ought to be easy fruit, that girl at the pub!"

With a guarded "Looks like it," Skene spurred his horse and cantered away down the green border of the by-road, to the discomfiture of an old woman feeding a rabbit and a goat.

Next day, the big pasture where the Lys skirts Hondebecq looked something like an English country race-course. Round the white-palined track ambled English Yeomanry officers, Masters of Hounds, some of them; grooms from regular Infantry battalions accustomed to playing polo in India; gunner N.C.O.s on mounts groomed to the nines, with their Artillery air of "We're as good as the Cavalry any day!"; here and there a perplexed guest—some big local farmer or wine merchant, trying to understand why English Infantry officers ride so indecently well, or where on earth all the transport came from, and how the

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A.S.C. Captain, driving that swell car, could be only a Captain, and not either a chauffeur or a Major-General.

Then there were ambulances with Nursing Sisters—English in grey and scarlet, Canadians in scarlet and blue, French and Belgians in white. There was a naval officer doing liaison with the Corps Artillery; and, last not least, a grey-whiskered baronet, Lord Lieutenant of his county, who, having insisted (some said to keep up his reputation for eccentricity) on coming out to France as a private in the R.A.M.C., had been appointed Salvage Officer to stop his plying convalescents with illicit drink.

He appeared on the course heralded by cheers and laughter, driving a smart chestnut cob between the shafts of Vanderlynden's old cart, with all the whip-flourish and elbow-arching of Sam Weller, senior, and beside him, not a hair out of place, not a wrinkle in her gloves, in her lightest colours and with her brightest smile, sat Madeleine herself. The police smiled and made way, the A.P.M. frowned, and grinned, the French officers stared and murmured. The old man made a circuit of the course, drew up by the enclosure, got down, gave his hand to the lady

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and conducted her to a seat near the English Nursing Sisters.

Skene muttered:

"Curse his cheek! what does he want to make a show of the girl for?" Cooler reflection followed. Far better old Fryern—a licensed "character"—whom every one knew and liked, sixty years old and not likely to do any damage, or even to remember the week after next—far better than some Staff pup, rich and young and lazy, who would spoil her if no worse. Then followed reflection cooler still: what on earth had it all to do with him—Skene?

A Yeomanry Major led the parade, in which old Mercadet, brilliant in the blue and strawberry of the French Mission, was putting his horse through the antics of the Haute Ecole.

After the riders came the wagon teams, Engineers and Medical Corps, Artillery, A.S.C. and Infantry, all to the sort of music that appeals to horses. Then came the jumping, and boxing, and various competitions, until at last in the spring twilight Skene led old Mercadet to the "Lion of Flanders," where their table was set ready in a corner. The place was packed with

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officers, humming with talk and the clink of glasses, thick with cigarette smoke.

Madeleine, in black, was threading in and out among the tables. To Skene she seemed years older again these few months. She had eyes and ears for everything, answered questions and gave orders all at once, turned aside the sharp puns in French and clumsier slang in English, and, with the same frigid indulgence, disengaged the fingers which, even at that early hour of the evening, were inclined to pinch her wrists or elbows, and made the appropriate remark to each fresh arrival, as though he were the one looked-for guest. For Skene, even, she had the right thing to say: "You have not seen my new piano, the one which used to be in the château. It is there in the little salon." And she nodded back over her shoulder, "Will you not play?"

Skene would not, devoting himself to his excellent dinner, and trying to think of nothing else. Wheather was recounting an adventure in his deliberately boobyish manner; to Skene it sounded like the buzzing of horseflies over a muck-heap:

"And so," I said to her. . . . "And so . . .

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she said to me . . . and then she went . . .”

And so on, through two courses, with oafish laughter and pigeon French. It took Skene his third glass of champagne to wash the taste from his mouth. Old Mercadet, old enough to be the father of the other two, was giving them addresses in Paris. The crowd was thinning now, but the heat had frosted the windows. Skene, sitting back to the wall, had a clear view of Madeleine passing in and out among the tables and disappearing to the kitchen or the cellar, or under the curtain to the little salon where, as she informed Wellin to check his guffaws, she had the Brigadier to dinner.

Wheather, to live up to his reputation as a funny man, had taken to calling for her, and asking her some stupid question in pigeon French, to which she invariably answered with a curt smile. Skene said sharply:

“Let the girl alone! She has quite enough to do to run her show without your foolery.”

He spoke almost with the rasp in which he gave orders, and caught Mercadet’s quizzical eye instantly on him, as if to say, “Ah, my young friend! That fetches you.” The effect on Wheather was even more disastrous. He sprang

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to his feet in imitation of a Tommy coming to attention, while his chair fell backward with a clatter.

"Sit down, you fool, you're drunk!" But Wheather stood his ground.

"On parade's on parade, and off parade's off parade." This old tag of the Regimental Sergeant-major brought laughter and applause, while Madeleine stepped forward and picked up the fallen chair. Imitating the well-known gesture of Charlie Chaplin and the statue, Wheather kissed the chair-back where her fingers had grasped it.

Luckily for Skene, at that moment, from behind the curtain came the opening bars of a Chopin Nocturne. Every one started, so strange in that place was the feeling of the music. Skene knew it by heart, fairy cobwebs on moonlit lawns over the footmarks of lovers on the grass; not wonderful for him to sit and listen. Far more strange was the effect on others, who could not even have named the composer. Wheather sat heavily in his chair, Wellin's jaw dropped, Mercadet began crossing his fingers, and his eyes shone. Laughter everywhere was stilled, glasses ceased to clink and feet to shuffle. Madeleine

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softly closed the door to the kitchen and stood with one hand on it, and lips just parted.

In Skene something seemed to sink, some cool draught of unearthly succour, down and down through the fumes of champagne and chartreuse, lengthening and clarifying his vision. He saw all these fellows not as the brutes he had thought them a moment ago, but as pitiful child comrades bent on an escapade of which no one of them could see the fateful issue, overhung by the shadow of death.

The music ceased. Wheather got up and butted his way out. Wellin followed: "He's very white . . . expect he's going to throw up his drink. I'll go and see he doesn't fall on the pavé!"

As they passed along in the twilight the side door of the little salon opened. Captain Castle could be seen drawing on his gloves, and waiting for the Brigadier.

CHAPTER XII

The Somme

THE division moved to a manœuvre area; the training for open warfare was begun. The weather was fine and hope ran high, rumours of the colossal struggle at Verdun were as yet vague and little appreciated in their reality by the New Armies that did not remember 1914, though they made old Mercadet very grave. There was quite another rumour, too, newer and more personal, having all the advantage of untarnished hope over grimed reality. Gough was supposed to be gathering a great English army for one decisive blow, and the division to which the Easthamptons belonged was to form part of it. In the lengthening evenings men and officers grew more and more cheerful. The horrors of the Flanders winter receded. They were encouraged, too, by the issue of steel helmets, and box respirators, and by the obvious turn of the tide in the matter of heavy artillery and the air.

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Then one day all was bustle and excitement. The orders had come. The division was to move south, for the Great Offensive. Queer to-day to recall the keen anticipation caused by that news. Some merely realized, perhaps, that they were sick of trench warfare, and that, as Ludendorff was to admit years after, attack was easier than defence—a few perhaps, that the hectic excitement in which they lived must burn itself out, and that whatever they had to do in the strength of its flame must be done at once. None realized what an artillery-prepared offensive on the then new scale could be. In the main, the feeling was probably simply a craving for something fresh, a refuge from trenches or drill. Besides, the reinforcements that reached them now did really bring the companies up to strength, and were not cancelled by casualties the same day.

Skene was walking up and down the little yard of a small pork-butcher's establishment, at kit inspection, dismissing his platoon by sections. He hated keeping men standing about uselessly and believed it did nothing but harm.

"Cap'n Thomas wants you, sir!"

In the front room of a little shop, where the backs of the words "*Quincaillerie—machines à*

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coudre" stared from the windows, Thomas was standing with Captain Castle.

"Division want you for a billeting stunt. Can you go?"

"If Thomas says so, sir!"

"Do you want to go?"

"I don't want to leave Thomas, or the men, sir!"

"I don't want to lose him, sir," said Thomas.

"You shall have him back! Get into the car!"

"I thought as much!" grunted Thomas.

An aged closed Daimler grunted and whirred up across the Place.

"You are going with Major Fryern to get our billets ready in our new area. Remember to treat people properly: there's a lot of bad blood between us and the French. You can make them understand, and old Fryern will do the tactful with any swells you meet. I'm too busy to come and I want Mercadet here. For God's sake get us a Brigade Head-quarters billet where the General can sleep!"

"I'll try, sir!"

"If you do, you may go far!"

Reporting at the château where Divisional Head-quarters were installed, Skene was sent to a

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disused lodge looking out on the Calais road; his knock on the door not being heeded, he stood admiring three horses—a taper-legged, full-shouldered, dark roan, so bright and quick that it could never have seen a remount camp; a big-boned, useful grey, one of those that always do better than they look; and the chestnut that had been driven at the horse show.

One of the grooms said to him, "I should go in, sir; he'll never hear you!"

Skene went in. In the small paved and plastered interior, intended for a gamekeeper, stood that aged baronet who had broken every regulation from age-limit to kit-restrictions. No one could possibly call "old Fryern" to book—no one that was anybody, because he knew every one of that sort—whiskered halfway down his face, cigar in mouth, Sam Browne undone, directing a chauffeur and two servants, who were packing shot-guns, fishing rods and cameras. He stared at Skene, and told him to fetch his kit and servant and be at the cross-roads in an hour.

Outside the gate he found an old red Panhard driven by a Belgian; got into it, and was taken back to his billet.

The Baronet was punctually at the rendezvous,

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with his almost regal state reduced to one chauffeur and one servant. The old car went well, and it was yet early when they passed through the medieval gates of Cassel under the old brazen weather vane with the motto:

“Quand ce coq chantera
Le Roi dans Cassel entrera!”

Far to the north were the twin towers of Dunkirk, and the tree-bordered Napoleonic route nationale running on towards them. East, beyond the drybones of Ypres, ghastly white in the sunshine, the noise and vapour of the Canadians engaged in the third battle, that desperate fatal skirmish of Maple Copse that no one ever knew about, so overshadowed it was by Verdun and the Somme. Westward were the towers of St. Omer at the foot of the chalk downs, where the home road wound to Boulogne. But the old Panhard slid south towards the slag-heaps by the coalfields and the Amiens road. Through merry Hazebrouck, that had seen Belgian and Bosche and finally English Head-quarters in its square; through St. Venant and Aire—Flanders was left behind. They were passing now through little rows of stumpy, sooty, miners' cottages. At that

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period of the War, when troops lived in the line and never went far back, it was usual for a "young" officer to know nothing outside his sector; Skene missed the Spanish towers, the elm-bordered pastures, the teeming fields of rich moist Flanders. Then they came to a more open road, and began to climb the first of the great chalk downs. They dipped into valleys where the streams actually gurgled, and the villages were clusters of one-storied, wattle-and-daub thatched buildings, beneath great stone châteaux surrounded by trees.

They came to villages where the flat cap, the innumerable transport, and indomitable good humour of the English were replaced by coffee-coloured men, with red fez-caps, or blue-coated, blue-helmeted machine-gunners—the French zone. It was now nearly two o'clock. Near a tiny village by a stone bridge, the Baronet said: "Lunch, Jevons," and got down, unfolding his long bones section by section like a human foot rule. "Let's come down and look at the big trout."

Skene was completely mystified. He followed the languid old gentleman down to the bridge, where they lay flat and peered at the dark shadow

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under the arch, deeply uncertain. "Not at home to-day," and they retraced their steps.

A cloth—a real cloth—had been spread on the grass under a dog-rose in flower—the car removed to a convenient distance—sandwiches, cheese biscuits, and moselle stood among the daisies and dandelions. The Baronet murmured amiably along, not unlike the sound of the stream below the bridge—larks rose from the high bare downside into the pale high sky—the stunted oak, may-bushes and grass were all aswing in the westerly breeze that had come no great distance from the sea.—It might have been Sussex. The Baronet's conversation glided from trout (he was so sorry Skene had not been able to see the big fellow below the bridge) to woodcock (he would try and get Skene invited for the shootin') with the easy assurance of one who never has to bother whether what he has to say will be listened to or not. He knew everybody and talked gently about everything, smoking his special cigars; Skene puffed at a pipe and listened.

They rejoined the car and continued threading the width of two and a half armies as far again as in the morning. If the trenches were the slums of that great city of two million English-speaking

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men, stretching across eighty miles of France, the road from Frevent through Doullens was the residential suburb. Sentries and military police gazed uncertainly at the French car in which English officers were driven by a Belgian chauffeur. They came to the hill-top village inhabited by their new corps at the sacred hour of tea.

In the middle of the old stone square, surrounded by houses of French rentiers who had gone to Brittany or Nice while their sons went to Verdun or Champagne, the car stopped before the inscription "B Mess" on a red and white Corps placard. A pleasant, high-pitched voice came through the open window, "What are you doing here!"

"Looking for you!" The Baronet unfolded himself. "May I bring my little boy?" And Skene was presently drinking tea among gentlemen wearing red tabs in a Picard parlour, and the atmosphere of a London Club—tea, cigarettes, conversation all belonged to people used to the very best, who were not going to alter their habits for a mere war.

He was taken to his billet by an A.D.C. whose perfection made him feel ashamed of his puttees, his trench-worn tunic, with leather cuffs, and the

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bullet hole in his cap. He did not dine with the Baronet, but with this lovely creature and half a dozen other young sparks who played poker after dinner. Skene could not afford it, so he smoked his pipe and presently went out for a walk. It was still early in the War. Specialists had not yet invaded Corps Staffs. . . . No one would let him look at the job he had come to do between tea and to-morrow's breakfast. He slept well in the good Somme air.

After breakfast at nine-thirty, he and the Baronet started out in the car with a map, and references. Skene wanted to work hard, to shrive his soul of that atmosphere of Corps Headquarters, where those tall, well-bred gentlemen seemed to live so well and never outraged good form by mentioning the War. He wanted to see every billet on his list, but the Baronet did not. They could see the Brigade Headquarters (Infantry and Artillery), and have a glance at the A.S.C., Engineers and Medicals. When Skene criticized billets that were either open fields or already crowded, the Baronet said it was up to the troops to get in where they were told. When Skene began measuring spaces for infantry transport, the Baronet left him, and had tea with a

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friend who told him the name of our new ambassador and what they were doing in London about butter.

Finally he motored Skene to within a few miles of the detraining place of his brigade, where they met the dark roan and the grey being ridden, and the chestnut being driven in the spring cart piled with what Skene knew to be guns and fishing rods. Here the Baronet bade him a genuinely kind farewell, hoping to see his "little boy" or "young feller" again. "Take care of yourself, and I'll get you some shootin' in the autumn!"

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At that time the Somme country was still beautiful. The French, who originally held this part of the Line, had never fought any great engagement there. The English troops that filtered into it up to June, 1916, found wild flowers—poppy, cornflower, campion, and a climate as different from that of Flanders as the climate of Sussex is from that of London.

They were in high hope, too. To have got away from the Salient, or La Bassée, was much! The tragic bungle of Loos was quite forgotten. Besides, the news was not so bad. The failures

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of Kut and the Dardanelles were over and done with. The French, left alone to stem the tide at Verdun, might say that an offensive between the Somme ridges was folly, but who believed them?

The Russians were astir. The Navy had fought another inconclusive "victory." The weather was glorious. A mournful splendour shines over the memory of the preparations for that adventure of the Somme, that ended in the mud of Beaumont Hamel and the swamps of the Ancre; a splendour that never gilded the sodden atrocities of 1917. It was still a voluntary—probably the greatest voluntary army of history that went cheerfully to victory! Skene, rejoining his division when it detrained behind Albert, felt like a happy schoolboy, after the Easter holidays going back, not so much to school, as to cricket.

It was in the light dusk of a June evening that beneath chalky downs arching purple to where the last sunset colour gave place to the first stars, he followed a white road beside such water and slim poplars as Skene at least associated with the frescoes of Puvis de Chavannes. Far behind him was the winter in the Flemish flats; here on a dry and powdery soil that looked as if it never

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could become mud, he saw himself heroical, as in those high visions of 1914, which had claimed him and many others for the ranks of that goodly company, setting out on a splendid and, incidentally, successful crusade. The smoke rose blue and straight from the field kitchens, the mules squawked and fidgeted in their odorous lines, small children ran out from whitewashed thatched cottages with flowers and postcards and chocolate, and all along the road, through gunners and sappers until he came to the Infantry, it was one long greeting—here Wellin and his guns, there Wheather talking to young Calthorp, and finally where the young moon silvered the tents and bivouacs, Long Thomas and Earnshaw welcoming him back, and little Mansfield twittering round like an overgrown canary.

“Hallo, our own sleepless man—been awake eight days and nights. No good your coming here like this, with the milk in the morning!—better have stopped away.”

“Don’t you believe him, jolly glad to see you back—we move in an hour,” Thomas interposed.

“Skene, you’re trying to get on in the army—hanging round Castle and doing his jobs—disgusting, I call it! . . .”

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“Earnshaw’s got the map—now look here!”

In Thomas’s tent, eating gingerbread, smoking, poring over the route map, they squatted, and all around them the moonlit chill of the chalky bottom seemed to freeze everything but the ground-base of the thundering bombardment.

A week or two later the division went into one of the mid-July attacks. They threaded their way through such a labyrinth of transport, dumps, light railway tracks and guns as had never been dreamed of. The attack had been carefully prepared, discipline was strict, they went into action without a sound.

They reached the sunken road which was their jumping-off place, a little after midnight of a close summer day, vibrating with gunfire. They stood waiting, still and silent, and yet with the sense of a great busy crowd about them; for they were only one of a dozen divisions waiting down miles of line for zero moment. It came. Skene gave the word to his platoon. Strung-up to intense excitement, it seemed hardly strange to him that, after leaping out of the sunken road with the others, he had not really moved but was lying on his back, his hands full of small round lumps of chalk. He had a vague idea

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that he ought to be going on with the company, but it seemed difficult to move, and, instead, he went, surely, to sleep. He woke up in darkness and a great noise, not the noise of the battlefield, but of a railway station. He was lying in the corner of what was, so far as he could see, a dingy and minute *salle d'attente*; his head ached with such pain as he had never felt before, and he had a strong desire to vomit. The noise that had awakened him was the jangle of a line of small cattle trucks running one upon the other; a miniature engine slid past the door within a yard or so of his face and stopped. Shouts, noise of steam, of iron rattling, the tramp of army boots, the passing of shaded lanterns—then dark forms bent over him, picked up the stretcher on which he was lying, moved him under a strip of sky, and then into the blackness of a cattle truck. He vomited with incredible pain and discomfort, then lay still on his back, not daring to move for pain and helplessness, watching the paling stars through a shrapnel hole in the roof.

For hours, it seemed, he lay, while the bass of a now distant bombardment was punctuated from the stretcher placed beside him by the refrain:

“Orderly! Isn’t he ever coming? Aren’t

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there any blank orderlies on these dashed trains?"

The little train was rattling at walking pace along the side of a bare down whose outline, seen through the doorway, became distinct against the grey, the silver, and at last the lemon-coloured light, and there swept suddenly into that little prisoning box on wheels, unmistakable, unforgettable, the smell of summer dawn, as though the flowers in resurrection, and the ghosts of scent and colour, summoned by Catastrophe, went walking.

It gave Skene the utmost delight. He realized without shame that, more than anything in the world, he wanted to cry. Beside him the voice rose above the rattle of the train: "Orderly! I want an orderly."

"What's up?" asked Skene in a voice he did not know. He could hear the other grunting with the effort of turning his head.

"It's my infernal shoulder. They've put me in so that it jars. Can you help me to turn a bit?" Skene did not think he could, but trying gingerly he found his left arm would move, and stretched it out. "Here," he said.

He could hear the other breathing hard, fighting

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the few inches between their grip. Then his hand was clasped and his wrist tugged with a groan that was a cry. Then there was silence, but for hard breathing, and then:

"That's damned good of you! I say, who are you?" Skene gave his name, rank and regiment.

"What have you got?"

"Don't know, except that I can't move and my belly's empty, and I wish I was dead."

"Well, you are, very nearly. I should think you're the only one left of your lot."

"Why do you think so?"

"Well, I'm Staff Captain, 506 Brigade. We were supposed to be on your left, but you weren't there, and when I came through the dressing station it was bung-full of your chaps."

"Which day was that?"

"Day before yesterday or day before that. Hell! I don't know. I was hit at eleven o'clock in the morning, and when I got to an ambulance, I saw one of your lot—Hunter, used to know him in India——"

"Yes, he was Adjutant."

"Oh well, he isn't now. He was hit in the neck, and when we got to the station, he'd slipped out of his stretcher, I suppose, at that infernal

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hairpin bend at what d'you call 'em. Anyhow he'd bled to death. My God! I am thirsty. Isn't there an orderly on this train?"

And Skene thought: "Soon I shall be dead, and I shall lie on the floor of hell, shouting for an orderly that never comes."

He must either have swooned or gone to sleep, for his next sensation was of falling down, down, down through nothing. The train had stopped, he noticed that it was a bright summer noon. The usual station noises were speeded up suddenly by a bugle call, whistles, shouts and scamp-ering. They were whipped out of the truck, he heard his companion cry out with pain, had an instant's glimpse of a busy station yard, and found himself in a white-painted ambulance, whose whirr and pulsation were echoed, as it were, by another whirr, as of aeroplanes, and the single drum-tap of machine-gun fire.

"Air raid," thought Skene. "This'll finish us probably."

The noises swooped up in a crescendo to a crash, shrieks and the tinkle of broken glass, but the ambulance still went on and Skene had just energy enough to think: "Missed it again, by George!"

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At sunset of that evening he lay, washed and cared for, in a ward with only two other cases, waiting for the Doctor's evening round. By great good luck he had been taken to a hospital installed in the château of a French lady with English connections, who had lent it as it stood. Skene could pass his gaze from white panels and shining floors to the laughing Cupids and gay garlands of Louis XVI.

Gingerly turning himself about and about with pain and difficulty, he could not discover the smallest abrasion of his skin. But for a grinding headache and the fact that nothing would stay on his stomach, he would not have been too ill at ease so long as he kept still. When the Doctor asked him: "What's the matter with you?" he answered faithfully: "I don't know." Two sets of stubby fingers passed all over him. "You don't remember what happened?"

"No, Doctor."

"Not sitting on a dump and throwing away matches carelessly?"

"No, Doctor."

The Doctor gave him a little shaving mirror. He saw his head and face with one side bald, and the skin either feathery white or angry red.

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“Well, you’ve had a very lucky escape.” And with that he was left. Through the great windows, wide open and covered with gauze against the flies, Skene could see the sunset over the beech-groves and bird-haunted lawns of the park, like a pattern worked in luminous silks.

With dusk he fell into that half-waking state which an unspoiled constitution opposes to overstrain and shock; into a repose just spoiled by phantoms. His heart drummed in his ears. He could hear the far-away bombardment, and fresh convoys arriving below. In the faint light that came in from the corridor crowded images kept chasing. He was trying to find billets for interminable streams of men and mules in a sunken road where the enemy’s fire beat them down as the hailstorm beats down corn. He went to Castle for leave to get them out of it, and Castle changed to Hunter, and Hunter bled to death, and when he fetched a cattle truck to take him away, there was old Mercadet laughing at him. And the laughter changed to tears, the face to Madeleine’s. All, that she would say was:

“He’ll never go sick no more,
The poor beggar’s dead.”

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He woke. The summer dawn had come, and far away, ethereal as feathers from an angel's wing, the faint notes of the bugle that woke him, woke many for the last time.

They kept Skene on milk for ten days, and he began to be able to hold his food and to move without too much difficulty. His head and ribs were bandaged, his eyes protected by yellow-tinted glasses. Presently he could creep with increasing ease about those high white passages, those festooned corridors with mirroring floors, and the straight alleys of the garden. But he was not right yet. At sunset especially, he was fearfully sorry for himself. This was a symptom indeed that became chronic with Infantry officers as the War reached what proved to be the half of its course. It was so obvious that one had only to go up to the Line often enough and death was certain. And this thought, not yet deep enough in Skene or his kind to overcome what had been the main impulse that called the New Armies into being, and is best expressed by the tag, "beating the Bosche," was yet strong enough to set recurring in the minds of the more imaginative the longing to "live" before they died.

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On the day Skene was pronounced fit to return to his regiment, he sat down in an arbour covered by dusty and untrimmed roses, and wrote to Madeleine. But he only enquired after her health and her father's, and asked whether she had news of her fiancé. He disliked posting the letter, feeling as though he were making a fool of himself, and finally destroyed it, when, two days later, he and his valise were deposited by the light railway amid a sea of tents on the western side of a bare hill, where with incredible difficulty he got himself at length directed to his battalion. He first fell in with the Quarter-master, old Adams, on his unhurried bandy-legged way towards the transport lines.

"Hallo, Skene, you've come back, 'ave you? That's more than most of them'll do. Oh yes, the Major's there, what's left of him. Barring me and him, there's hardly a soul you know. Come over to my tent and let's have a snappy one! Plenty of time for reporting after lunch!"

Nothing loth, Skene followed the squat figure; and, sitting on the end of a stolen stretcher which the veteran conveyed with him, all over France, he listened.

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"Never seen such a job in my life—fourteen officers gone, including the Adjutant. In D Company, Thomas is wounded; Earnshaw is wounded. They sent back for young Vickers, who was doing transport, and he went into the next show, commanding a company. But neither him nor the company has been heard of since. Reinforcements? Well, I've been doing transport and giving an eye to the orderly room, besides my own job, and I ought to know. Seven hundred men while you've been away, and even now we're not up to strength!"

What he saw when they went over to lunch dispelled Skene's remaining doubts. The Major, perceptibly greyer and slower, was almost cordial in his welcome. Round the trestle table were a score of fresh faces, subalterns straight from the big reserve battalions in England with the gloss of home training shining all over them, and older men, obviously recalled from jobs of all sorts and reduced from home-given captaincy—one and all staring at Skene with that half-resentful respect which those who had still to go "through it" used to show to those who had already been "through it."

Skene found himself in command of a company

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and spent the afternoon in making the acquaintance of the officers and N.C.O.s.

"All they want," the Major had said, "is a little experience!" Skene, who had observed that in this War, contrary to all others, experience rendered one less, and not more, fit to carry out one's duties, was cheered all the same by their unsuspecting good spirits, willingness, and that delightful gust of the old "Beat the Bosche" tradition straight from England.

Shortly after that, he was marching his company up through the interminable layers of transport and dump, artillery and trench tramway. Helmets and respirators, bombs and artillery, everything was improved, and the spirit of the hour was that of victory. The French had hung on at Verdun, the Russians were attacking; our offensive, if not a complete success, had strained the enemy to the point of putting dismounted cavalry into the Line. Then there was our new method of attack, and Skene plunged along in the rear of a tank. Shuffling and stumbling, and trying to keep his men together in the fearful medley of noise and vaporous dusty murk, he kept saying to himself: "This is it—this is really it. At last! A real attack! A real vic-

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tory!" and shouting: "Keep up, keep up!" The tank disappeared in mounds of broken bricks, iron posts, and wire. "Now for the Bosche!" he thought, loosening his revolver. The next moment, the barrage descended on him. Stunned breathless, crouching in a hole, he waited. Suddenly the clamour dwindled and passed.

He sat among the powdered ruins of a village from which the early morning sun was drawing the stench of decay and chemicals. The next wave carried the roar of the battle further on. He wrote home a cheery postcard in the intervals of collecting his men and awaiting relief, but no relief came, and no rations. He sent back runners, but by the time a reply came, his head had begun to go round and something had drawn up his stomach as a bootlace draws up a leather purse. By the time his servant had made some sort of tea and he knew where his rendezvous was, his knees had folded up under him and his eyes were closing. He reached the camp—four tents in a patch of star-fissured mud—leaning on his servant, deadly sick—ill, in the midst of all that. When he came to, a Doctor was bending over him, and talking to another.

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They said "operation." They might have said "operations"—sleepless nights and foodless days and the everlasting punch, punch, punch of earth-shaking explosions on ears and brain, on backbone and stomach, had reduced his resistance, and the most commonplace civilian ailment easily had him down.

At the last halt, whence they had fetched him in, he had, in the course of "cleaning up," unearthed three unwounded Bosches in a cellar—seeing only Skene's bayonet man, walking alone, the first Bosche put his hands up, the second fired a Mauser automatic, and the bayonet man dropped. Skene squeezed his heavy Colt instinctively, and the Bosche rolled into a shell-hole: the left side of his face was gone, but his glazed right eye stared fixedly at Skene, who had then sat for who knows how long, staring back and saying aloud, "Well, you shouldn't have done it!" as his senses and self-control steadily left him.

He wanted so badly to explain to the Doctors that he was suffering from "evil eye." They sent him home to England.

CHAPTER XIII

Interlude

SKENE'S second bout of hospital life was passed in a big hotel at a semi-deserted south-coast watering place. A German destroyer had fired one shell into it, and a Zeppelin had bombed its outskirts. The lighting, the trams, and the usual places of amusement, were therefore absent, and two depots of county regiments were present; the result was an atmosphere in which it was simply impossible not to get well. There was nothing to do but eat, walk, sleep, play games, and read. Away from irregular meals and rest, from bullets and shrapnel, from the everlasting concussion—the punch, punch, punch of continual explosions on the nerve centres, the healthy, unbrooding youth of England recovered fast.

Getting out and about in the summer sunshine, Skene had the sensations that a fly has perhaps on a window-pane—a curious little dizziness,

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from being upright, and at right angles to the ground; he had, too, a lively appetite, weak knees, and a great faculty for sleep. The neat little place that had been cut in his side, to take out something that was turning black, healed gradually.

From that moribound atmosphere he got no very clear notion of how England was progressing, in the third year of the War. But being pronounced cured, he was given a week's leave before rejoining, and went home.

A changed home! While still on his back, a black-edged letter had brought him news of his uncle's death. "You remember how he used to complain of his breathing." (Skene had forgotten.) "It seems that his heart was weak. He took a chill at the bazaar for the relatives of the wounded. Pneumonia supervened, and he died in two days. The only explanation the doctor can suggest is that the War excited him, in some way he did not show!" No, truly! thought Skene, but he was genuinely grieved, and even more surprised—not so much at his uncle's death, as at the nature of his own feeling about it. Grieved, yes—but somehow this death, of his nearest relative, did not affect him greatly.

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It was like the death of some one in a very good story or play—moving, but not vital quite. Was it that he had seen too much death? No, deeper than that! He was changed. The old quiet life of the office in the Close was like another existence—an existence in fiction—good fiction, life-like, but not real.

Skene went to an aunt's—to a new, hygienic, scrupulously neat house, in a new healthy suburb on the hill, a mile from the Close and the old town. He was greeted warmly and taken good care of. The life was simple to frugality. He gardened and grew fit; when the day came to rejoin, he was annoyed with himself that he was not sorry to go. It seemed ungracious. His aunt had taxed her little establishment to its limit, let him smoke in her living-room, and come down late to breakfast! But he could not help it. His place was in France, in the B.E.F. He didn't want exactly, to go back, but he didn't want to stay.

He returned during September to be one of the seething crowd in the great Base Camp at Etaples, with, not merely the War, but the same battle still going on.

It was almost a year since he had passed that

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way. The first year of the War had changed him from a quietly happy, rather commonplace provincial architect, who might easily have slid into middle life without more excitement than influenza, moving house, or receiving a legacy, into a young officer of the New Armies, punctilious from over-training, callow from want of fighting experience, but very earnest in his one idea—to contribute his share to the overthrow of the enemy. Now another twelve months had almost passed and he was again at Etaples. But not the same Skene—not the same Etaples, not the same war.

He had now seen more actual continuous warfare than any pre-War officer had seen for a hundred years. He was stretched all over, in mind and body. His clothes failed to cover his wrists and meet round him. His skin was hardened and reddened, his voice coarsened from shouting in the open, and he coughed from time to time as only men do who have breathed gas. His mind was full of expedients, ways of obtaining food and drink, of avoiding toil and danger—it contained a new scale of values, as to who must be saluted and obeyed and who could be bluffed and ordered off.

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The camp, which he remembered as an open sand-hill, dotted with tents and a few wooden mess huts and baths, had become an enormous enclosure containing probably a hundred thousand officers and men, streets of buildings, partly brick or concrete, railways, roads and drainage far ahead of most French provincial towns. No longer was it controlled by a few weary regulars, wounded at Mons or on the Marne, and filled with eager young or young middle-aged men like himself. A new type—the real base officer, who did not go, and had never meant to go, within miles of the fighting—was functioning now in proper offices, with all the dignity and perversity of Aldershot or Chatham. And round them eddied the ceaseless tides of reinforcement officers and men.

Skene met Earnshaw in a queue of eighty-odd, that were filing through a medical-inspection hut, before three doctors, who, beginning by examining men carefully, were being driven to mark them A or B and keeping the crowd moving. Skene exclaimed: "Hullo! Thought you were dead!" and heard Earnshaw speaking the same words. They laughed and compared symptoms. Earnshaw had been hit in the thick of the leg; not

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hurt much, he said, but he had started "going bad." He added, "It's left off discharging now and I reckon I'm all right!" But there was no volunteering spirit in his voice. They had both reached the point now of supposing they would have to "go on with it." They were both passed "A," and posted to battalions they had never heard of. "Conscription coming," said Earnshaw.

The attitude of the great voluntary army which fought the battle of the Somme towards Conscription was definite. A man might have the best reasons for staying at home. He might be honest and right in deciding to do so. But he had cut himself off from the Voluntary New Army of the War. If he was forced in now he would never be one of them. Skene felt it. Earnshaw, the least imaginative man in the world, felt it. As to the Australians in the fighting line, even at the end of the resources of voluntary enlistment, they voted against forced service.

That Base Camp, in which Skene and Earnshaw spent the next few days, held tens of thousands of men—a wooden and canvas and concrete town on a bare sand-dune. On

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those light evenings, when the parades of the day were over, it was like a gigantic ant-heap. The men swarmed round the canteens, cinemas and concert halls, and the thousands still left sprawled on the warm sand, a few writing and reading, more smoking and talking, but the most playing or looking on at great childish gambling games, "Crown and Anchor," "Poker," "Slippery Sam," the usual transparent race-course swindles, but most of all "House." And on the Picard beach, between the ragged firwoods and the never still railway, the place hummed in the long twilight to the tune of: "Housey—housey! thirty-four—forty-five—legs-eleven—click-ety-click—top of the house! Come on, me lucky lads—who's for a card?"

Officers were rather better off. They had free access to what was becoming a very tolerable club, they could even get as far as Le Touquet or Paris Plage, bathe or play tennis, visit their friends in that little kingdom of hospitals, or have tea. No longer were they compelled to wait, as twelve months ago, in a queue by a small hut, where a voluntary canteen run by ladies provided a bathroom at which a tame donkey watched ablutions through the window, and a Scotch

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orderly stoked the tiny copper. Skene and Earnshaw were so unlike that they respected each other. Besides, they had gone into the War together at the start. As old, experienced soldiers they escaped much tedious duty, and could usually spend the afternoon at Paris Plage or dine at the club. Those were the golden days of returning health and almost perfect idleness, and they passed too quickly.

Their orders to report arrived on the same day, and they went to Amiens together, arranging to meet at a well-known restaurant for lunch. They sat opposite each other there, and saw each other in innumerable mirrors. Skene drank Chambertin, and reflected that officers, whether in mirrors or not, were deucedly alike. Earnshaw drank whisky and probably thought of nothing. They had a dispute over a liqueur called Cordial Médoc which each imagined he had discovered.

As they were going out, Earnshaw grinned: "There's a friend of yours!" And Skene, turning his head, saw in a corner Madeleine Vanderlynden sitting at a table on which stood a little bag and a café crème. He felt as if he had dropped clean through the earth. He heard

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Earnshaw chuckle, "So long, old thing!" and a click of the closing door. Without any attempt to follow him, Skene started, with what he felt to be a jerk, to cover the ten yards that separated him from Madeleine. There was no reason in him at that moment.

It was not so much that he wanted her, as that he wanted to be cared for. The moment had been preparing during the whole of his year's service in France. The dangers he had faced, the rough out-of-door life, the fasting and feasting, his guardian's death, and his own growing perception of the inevitable fate before him; the nervous overstrain and shock, the convalescence and rest—all culminated in that instant with the fatal appropriateness called Providence.

Whether or not he showed her anything of this, she remained perfectly composed. She said she had lunched, but she accepted a liqueur, and then began to ask politely about Skene.

"So you have left the farm?"

"Yes. I have placed myself in a Government office!"

"Well, I've been to hospital twice since I last saw you!"

"Ah, but you are well now!"

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"Yes! I'm going back to It to-morrow!"

"Ah!" She put into it the only feeling that was possible. Not commiseration, not ignorance, just simple understanding.

"And you, what are you doing here?"

"I am staying with my aunt!"

"For how long?"

"How should I know?"

Skene pushed on breathlessly:

"How is your father?"

"All right, I suppose. Why not?"

"And your fiancé?"

Madeleine turned her face, a pale oval, between her white hat and her white hands.

"He is dead."

Skene dropped his hand on her forearm:

"When?"

"How should I know?" She looked away, but did not move her arm.

"Then are you sure?"

She turned to him again, her whole vital self shining in her eyes:

"He is dead, for me!"

Skene could only find to say:

"Believe me, I am sorry."

Turning her face with its brimming eyes away,

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she shrugged her shoulders, but still did not move her arm.

A sense of futility enveloped Skene—futile the words he had said, futile to offer any kind of sympathy with the trouble before him.

It was the last moment he ever spent in his peculiar attitude of sympathetic friend.

“You know this is an officers’ restaurant?”

“I know now.”

“I shouldn’t advise you to come here, unless of course you wish to.”

“It’s all the same to me.”

Skene thought: “Oh, is it?” and put his glass down. So did she.

After all they were empty. It was the vacant hour when lunch is being cleared away and the tables re-set in readiness for the English tea, just beginning to invade the English bases. The waiter was obviously wishing them gone; the very silence and emptiness robbed them of privacy.

“What shall we do now?” Skene asked her.

“But I have nothing to do.”

“It’s too early for tea. What about the cinema?”

“I don’t see any obstacle.”

Skene paid, and they went out into the street,

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full of the uniforms of half a dozen nations. Before the door of the cinema was a long queue controlled by military police. At the doorway they were met by a flat refusal—not a seat to be had. They turned away: Skene's heart was thumping. He managed to get out:

"There's nothing to be done but to take you back to your aunt's."

"Nothing but that."

In a quiet cobbled street near the cathedral a well-kept, unpretentious café was displaying the English llegend:

EGGS, FISH, CHIPS, TEA

pasted on the glass of the windows.

The private house door was to the right. Madeleine turned to Skene with a simple "Here we are!" In Skene, with every step from the cinema, the blood had run faster—the blood hammering out in his temples the fateful doggerel:

"He'll never go sick no more,
The poor beggar's dead."

His voice changed in his throat to a voice he did not know, stammering, beseeching:

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“Look here—I’ve got to go back to It again to-morrow. . . . Let me stay. . . . Don’t send me away.”

And Madeleine, drawing back into the darkness of the entry, answered, “Well then, my poor friend——!”

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Two hours later, they sat opposite each other at a little wooden table set for them in the private room of the café. The wooden panelling, painted stone-blue, was decorated with large and awe-inspiring photographs of the proprietor and his wife, and with certificates of the secular and religious instruction of their children. On the middle of the mantelpiece, under a glass bell, stood Madame’s “*couronne de nocces*,” flanked by picture postcards, English and French, bearing the stamps of all the different theatres of war. Over the glass door that separated them from the steam and uproar of the bar was a spectacular representation of the last pilgrimage to Notre Dame de Lourdes. Over the black and odorous entry to the kitchen was the highly coloured advertisement of a firm of champagne-growers, representing an incredibly waisted damsel pour-

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ing foam from a bottle into a flat glass held by the now forgotten pre-War *piou* in his red breeches and *képi*. From one doorway or the other, Madame kept coming in, bringing with her own hands this dish or that bottle.

While Skene feasted, his eyes devoured Madeleine; there were puckers at the corners of her light silky eyebrows.

"Listen now," she said. "Since we are together like this, I do not wish to deceive you. Madame here is no aunt of mine."

"What does it matter?"

"Only this,—she may not want us here on account of the police,—better give her something!"

When the Patronne swung her enormous circumference near them with the bill, Skene explained that it was now too late for him to rejoin his camp.

"Madame," he said, "has sons who are soldiers—she well understands that when one is young, one cannot always go back to camp."

A lucky hit! For ten minutes they had to listen to the tale of Madame's sons—the one in the Infantry who was a priest in civil life; the one at Salonika; the one who had been killed

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at Verdun. Then Skene kissed the old lady good night, to her intense gratification, and as he and Madeleine mounted the narrow stair abreast, she called after them "*Bon amusement!*"

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Midnight had hardly ceased chiming on old bells before Skene began to think.

Lying on his back, his right arm crushed under a burden that had in a few hours become so suddenly and vitally precious, he turned his head from the sleepy smiling face at his shoulder, to the spotless cleanliness of the little room ("I put it a little in order myself," she had said) lit by a candle flickering under a pink paper shade ("Because I like us to see one another"); he turned back again and framed the first question he had put for many hours: "To-morrow?"

Bare arms closed round his head so that he could neither speak, hear nor see.

"To-morrow will be like that over again!"

"No, but listen. You know perfectly well what it is to be a soldier. . . . A few hours late, a day or two absent, and then endless trouble . . ."

"There is always trouble, one way or another!"

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"Better be sensible and arrange where we can meet when I can get leave?"

"I know that as well as you!" She was smiling no longer, wide awake and business-like as ever he had seen her in her father's kitchen or her restaurant.

With puckered brows, she stared at the ceiling. Outside a patrol passed in the echoing street, with a clank and a grumble of voices.

Skene went on: "For you it's easy enough. You have my address, and wherever they send me my letter will follow—unless the censor's jealous—— But for me—shall I write to the farm, or where?"

"That's just it. I don't know."

"Have you sold the 'Lion of Flanders'?"

"Yes. Sold it well, at a profit!"

"Why? Were you tired of it?"

"No!"

"Then why!"

"Because there is only one way from Verdun to the Somme, and he must come by it! It is the railway, here!"

"But you say he is dead!"

"One says those things!"

"But, Madeleine, what am I doing—here?"

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"That's what your General will ask you—if he finds out!"

Skene was nonplussed.

She went on: "I write and write to him. I know for certain he gets my letters . . . but at last, you know, there comes a point at which one says 'I won't be served like this!' And the same day I see you, and now I wish to be for you."

"You don't wish to go home?"

"No, not that in any case."

"Where then?"

"How should I know?"

"My poor Madeleine. What will you do?"

"Work, to be sure! I have already placed myself in an office!"

On that unromantic basis Skene had to leave it.

CHAPTER XIV

The Functioning of G., A., and Q.

THE convent that occupied all one side of the little village street of La Croix sur Flanche, in the Department of the Somme, was of stone, with a steep slate roof, between dormers on which an aged bright-coloured lichen had worked fairy patterns. Inside, the rooms, whitewashed, and furnished with unpainted wood, had long been evacuated, and were now inhabited by the staff of the Nth Division, pulled out of the line in a battered and decimated state, to fill and fatten up for another "show."

At that period, Divisional Staff was very much what pre-war organization had made it, though its personnel was already entirely changed. It was still a Council of Ten Red Hats, General, two Aides, three "General" Staff Officers (who directed operations when there were any to direct), three officers representing the Adjutant-

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General and Quartermaster-General and the A.P.M. But with the perversity of that war, things were already getting upside-down. The General and Aides were obliged, by the complexity of the training, the maze of Intelligence Reports, to do what the G. side told them. A. & Q. were rapidly overshadowing G., as it became increasingly obvious that in years of maintaining a division in the field, there could only be some weeks of operations. Above A. & Q. were already towering the three technical specialists without whom nothing could be done—the Heads of the Medical, Transport and Ordnance Services, by whom alone it was possible to live, with the necessary food, ammunition and weapons. Still undreamed of, there loomed in the future, all those others, specialists in bombs, tramways, gas, forestry, roads, agriculture, claims, courts-martial, rats, incinerators.

In spite of their new and relatively comfortable surroundings, Divisional Head-quarters was not happy. The first series of attacks on the Somme, in spite of the "Victory" headlines in the English papers, and considerable drain on the resources of the enemy, had devastated the domestic arrangements of the B.E.F. So-and-So had been

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“sacked,” sent back to England with loss of rank and future prospects. “Yes, really. So-and-So, by Gad!”

There had been consternation at conferences at G.H.Q. and various Army Head-quarters, from which saddened commanders of formations had returned and spoken seriously to their immediate subordinates. “Either,” they said (they had it straight from G.H.Q.), “there must be better staff work, or examples would be made!” Examples! Old So-and-So!

Thus consternation had filtered down to the actual working staff of the Nth Division, transmitted by their Commander, at a long conference, held at eight in the morning (summer time) to a properly shaved (but as yet unbreakfasted) roomful of officers, on whom it made a profound impression.

No one knew what was going to happen next. High up in the hierarchy of the B.E.F. well-known faces had disappeared, men no one had heard of were doing old jobs, more curious still, new men were doing new jobs that no one had heard of either. Roads, water, tramways, machine-guns, timber, were all being taken away from the jurisdiction of units of brigades, divi-

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sions, even corps, and made into separate "services." It was rumoured that even so exalted an authority as "Corps" could not run a train or close a road without referring to the Deputy Administrator of Something or other.

As for a division—well!

Every one spoke of all this as a personal grievance. No one saw it as an inevitable step. No one had read General Ludendorff's Memoirs—they were not yet written—so that no one knew that the same thing had already been done by the Bosche.

G. branch, the strategic and tactical—or as they preferred to style it, "fighting" side of the staff—came out of its monk-like retirement and consulted the Adjutant-General and Quarter-master-General's side—(commonly known as A. & Q. or more briefly, Q.)—as to what was to be done. United wisdom arrived at the conclusion that they must have more "help." You could not increase the establishment of the Divisional Head-quarters, but you could "take some feller out of some crowd or other, and make him do something!" This was the idea of G. branch. G. took a high line all along. They

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were the real staff, precedent in the hierarchy—it was all the fault of Q.

“How,” asked G. of Q., “can you expect us to function, when we order an operation and you don’t give it the necessary supplies?”

Q. went white all over with excitement. Just like G. to talk like that! It was G.’s way to say, “This division will now move to . . .” (so often misspelt) and leave it to overdriven Q. to find out how twenty thousand officers and men, and nearly ten thousand animals and vehicles and God knew (Q. didn’t) what other clutter, were to get there. But Q. didn’t say so. It had to keep its job. All its pre-war staff had long been gone here or there, and Q. was now filled up with mere junior regulars who had wounds, or uncles in England, and was getting along in this God-forsaken country by the light of such common sense as it possessed. What Q. did say, and quite respectfully was: “Had G. heard of the new extra burdens imposed on Q. by trench warfare—trench boards, trench mortars, trench helmets, trench stores, all going up or down the same one-way road?” G. shrugged its shoulders. That was Q.’s business. Q. pointed out

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politely that it was not. On the contrary, it was not even A.'s business. No! to be precise, in a division, it was the A.P.M.'s.

This brought matters to a head. The Drama has its unities. It only remained to call in the A.P.M. and ask him more in sorrow than in anger, why the traffic on the strategic roads was not better controlled during operations.

The A.P.M. was (of course) a middle-aged cavalry officer, good at the game of polo, for which the division hoped to put in a good team, when next at "rest." He met the G.S.O.2. (second dignitary of G. branch) at lunch and wanted to know how the hell he was to superintend traffic when he couldn't get into his office for suspected spies and claims for damage to civilian property.

About this time it chanced—on such slim threads did man's destiny hang during the War—that Captain, now Colonel Castle, translated after a glorious apotheosis in the first Somme attacks, to the far-away heavens of "Corps," heard of the difficulty, and said he would see what could be done.

"What we want," said the division (and he had heard the same at eight other divisions in the

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Umpteenth Corps), "is a feller who has some combatant experience—otherwise he won't know what's what—he must know something about roads, an' be able to read a map—he mustn't be a captain or we shall be told we are reducing the available number of company commanders—he mustn't be a boy—and—oh, very important—he must be able to speak French and—er—Belgian (for to the end, the Staff found it difficult to know exactly what to call Flemish—it sounded so like Yorkshire) and—er—Bosche if possible—then he'll be able to deal with—natives, and prisoners!"

Colonel Castle, gifted with that capacity for abstract ideas so rare in the army of his native land, had also a thorough knowledge of the actualities. No divisional staff could tell him anything about the horrors of rain-sodden darkness on shell-hole-pitted roads, when ammunition going up jammed ambulances coming back, and civilians evacuating farms got stuck in infantry relieving. He went to his hut and drafted his well-known report on "the congested state of the traffic-arteries in forward areas, with a suggested remedy." Peace settled down again on the Convent of La Croix sur Flanche. Castle

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had an idea. That was hopeful. And the idea of Colonel Castle grew and grew. Admired by his juniors, loved by his contemporaries, respected by his seniors, he had also, through relatives highly placed, and through school and regiment, that influence without which nothing could be done in the B.E.F. Above all, there was his personality, undimmed by two years of war, of which eighteen months had been spent never farther back than Brigade Head-quarters—the personality of Colonel Castle who wanted to fight on and win, but thought that victory lay in economizing our men, while the enemy squandered his. And so in the fulness of time, there was issued a General Routine Order, instituting the appointment, by divisions, of an officer, to be known as “Clearance Officer,” possessing the following qualifications: (*a*) not less than one year’s active service, (*b*) knowledge of foreign languages and (*c*) proficiency in map reading, who, stationed at the most convenient spot in the divisional area, would, in liaison with Q., French Mission, and A.P.M., examine, classify, direct, and control all traffic whatsoever, military (personnel or stores), civil or prisoners of war, upon the forward traffic-arteries, and should receive

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additional duty pay at the rate of umpence a day.

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The Routine Order was duly read by the Staff of the Nth Division. They read many, every day, without enlightenment. And one day when Castle was present, inspecting, arranging, advising on a thousand and one things, some weary wanderer in the tangle said to him:

"This memorandum of yours. It sounds all right, but who on earth shall we get to do it—old Dakers?"

"Who's that—the old chap from the Canadians—has he any qualification?"

"No—but we usually give him any odd job, and he gets through it!"

"I see!" Castle's eyes twinkled: "Yes, look here—give old Dakers the job and the pay, and attach young Skene to him, 10th Easthamptons—between them they'll help you a lot!"

"Stop a bit—let's write it down—who did you say—how do you spell it? Right-O. Thanks awfully!"

Thus, through the complexity of that great machine, with its millions of men, its mountains of material, its interweaving and reaction of

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thought and deed, a little thread spun itself out to Skene, and drew him into new paths.

It reached him, dejected and wet, on a soaking day amid the ruins of a Picard village. He had found his new battalion—but he could not feel the same towards it—and no wonder. It was composed of people who for one reason or another had not come out sooner, and others who would never have come out at all but for the looming shadow of Conscription.

They were determined and well trained; but for Skene it was like having to start all over again—he felt as a boy feels who has been put back, unjustly, to a form from which he has emerged a year before. The lot of them, good or bad, had now to learn all that he had learned in the twelve months passed.

Although he never had any doubt that England could not be beaten, he began to wonder, now, if the victory would be so complete as he had always assumed. He had always taken it for granted that he would eventually land in Brussels if not in Berlin, and then march home with the battalion.

He began to wonder now, listening to that familiar sound, the tap, tap of the German machine-

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guns, the same sound, the same guns and men, perhaps, as of the year before.

It was partly his experience of the expenditure of time and treasure and human life necessary to conquer a line of smashed-in burrows and rusty wire that meant nothing on the map. Partly a funny feeling in his inside. Partly new realization of the infinite comfort of a woman—partly a dawning doubt as to whether the staff work was all it might have been.

When Skene got orders to report at Divisional Head-quarters, he obeyed without elation but with a sort of curiosity.

By that war-method of traveling, known as "lorry-jumping," that is, by waiting in an obscure Flemish or Picard lane, turned by fate into a traffic-artery, and boarding a lorry or ambulance, splashed to the neck, with all one's household goods on one's back—Skene arrived at La Croix sur Flanche, and saw the red and green lamps and the sentry at the Convent gate. In the Nuns' garden, he wrung out his cap, and wiped his boots. The doorway, in addition to its little crucifix and holy water-stoop with sprig of box, now bore the letters "A & Q" roughly drawn on a bit of board and hung on a nail by a piece of string.

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In the white-washed schoolroom he found a weary young man with that pale complexion that comes from the shock and the loss of blood, following a bad body wound, however well healed. He stated his business.

“O my God!” said the young man, and rummaged hurriedly among piles of papers. “Here take this!”—an armful was thrust on Skene—“You’ll find your C.O. in the cubby-hutch by the gate!”

Relapsing into his papers, the young man called after Skene, “Are you sure you can speak French, because he can’t! Have you brought your servant? What do you say your name is?”

Skene traversed the soaking garden, where the odour of good green vegetables mingled with the stench of bad drains, and dived into the porter’s lodge.

That little lodge was a dark stone-and-plaster cubicle against the high-tiled wall of the convent schools. Here old Jules Lemoineau, gatekeeper and gardener, had lived with his aged wife until the first shells fell. The old wooden bedstead behind the partition, the crucifix, family photographs, picture postcards, were still in their places on the white-washed walls. Vine leaves round

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the little barred window reduced light to a greenish twilight.

On the door was a little wooden placard, "Divisional Clearance Officer."

Inside, a venerable old gentleman, grey and bald, with Maple-leaf badges in his lapels, was reading through spectacles. Skene just refrained from saluting, catching sight of the three stars on his cuff. The old man looked up: "Come in 'n' have a drink!"

No one ever resisted such an invitation on a wet day on the Somme. They sat over two ponies of whisky and water, produced from under his chair, while the shrewd old Colonial sized up and summarized the situation.

"They've too much to do!" he nodded his head in the direction of the Head-quarter Officers, "and most of 'em never earned ten dollars—so we'll have to help 'em. I can't run, and I can't parlee, but you can" (he said "Kearnt," and "Kean"). "We mess in 'D' Mess, but I expect we'll get one of our own. You sleep here. Tell your servant!"

In this way Skene's life was saved.

CHAPTER XV

Sheer Devotion

AS a matter of fact, Skene was without a servant at the moment, and lost no time in seeing the Officer Commanding what was then known as an "Employment Company," with a view to rectifying the omission. There followed the first of the busy nights, preparing for the division to take up a fresh sector. Skene had to go right up forward to take over, and returning about five in the morning, had slept through, as agreed with Captain Dakers, until lunch was on the table.

"Your new batman has come!" said the old Canadian; "he's some cook!"

Skene looked at his plate, and thought hard. Pork chops and beans. Not half bad. Where had he tasted that savoury dish last? Rum omelette, by George—Red wine, instead of that everlasting whisky—Coffee.

"Like to see your new man? Don't mind me. I'd like to see him myself!"

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"Yes, please!"

"Burnside, send Mr. Skene's servant here!"

A squat figure with the ghost of pre-war regular soldier's "smartness" about it filled the little doorway. Skene only took one glance, and threw his harshest rasp into his voice:

"What the devil do you mean by this?"

"Orders was to report to you, sir!"

"Go back to the kitchen. If you move, I'll have you put under arrest!"

"You seem hard on the man, Skene, what's up?"

"Tell you when I've spoken to that Employment Company!"

After a short conversation, Skene put down the field-telephone receiver: "I'll have him back, if I may. You'll hear what he says, and, if you still wish it, I'll keep him, but you must hear first. Jermyn!"

The square figure in well-brushed khaki reappeared.

"You've spoken the truth, I find! Why did you volunteer for the job directly you knew it was with me?"

"Wished to come back to you, sir!"

"If you do, you'll be on the strength of Captain

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Dakers' unit. If ever I have to 'run' you for anything, he'll deal with you severely. Do you understand that?"

"Yessir!"

"You've got a perfectly clean conduct sheet?"

"Yessir!"

"Of course you have. You're an old soldier."

"Yessir!"

"After the retreat you were found wandering about, and were arrested. Your regiment moved and you were at Base and got the job of store-keeper to the Quartermaster of the Easthamp-tons!"

"Yessir!"

"He had to get rid of you——"

"There was a little misunderstandin', sir!"

"A little missing, you mean. Then you took on as my batman because you thought it was a soft job. Was it?"

"No, sir!" A grin here.

"Where did I take you?"

"Front line—'orrible dangerous places!"

"You'll go there again if you try any tricks!"

"I'll be no trouble, sir. I can cook!"

"You always could. Why did you leave me?"

"I—I don't like to say, sir!"

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"No. You stole my trousers, and sold them to another officer's servant, and got drunk on the proceeds, in Boeschepe. You went to clink. Your second go, in the army. You'd been in clink in civil life. What was your job?"

"Light porter, sir!"

"Rot, you picked up odd jobs on race-courses!"

"I've 'ad misfortunes, sir!"

"That's nothing to what you'll have, if you touch anything that isn't yours, or get the worse for liquor here! Got it?"

"Yessir."

"Right. Here's five francs to start with!"

"I've money on me, sir. I'd rather bring you a list at the end of the week!"

"Good start. You're improving. That's all!"

Left alone, Captain Dakers smiled at Skene.

"You're mighty particular. Do you mean to say you worry what a man's been?"

"We don't like dishonesty or drink. Anyone who has to do with racing is generally afflicted with both. Anyone who's been to prison usually goes again. I shouldn't employ that man in civil life. But he can cook and I've a hold on him!"

"He seems to like you!"

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"That sort likes anyone who'll give them a sharp short order, and make them obey!"

"We take men as we find 'em, in Canada!"

"We don't!"

Captain Dakers' man was a Belfast school-master called Burnside, whose eyes had been badly damaged by gas, and who had learned all that the army could teach him about cooking just as he would have learned and passed examinations in any other subject under the sun, but he lacked just that touch of imagination born of necessity which Jermyn (always known as Jerry) supplied out of the bitter experiences of a horrible past. This was not wonderful, for whereas cooking for and valeting an officer meant all that Jerry expected of life, an easy job diversified by three hearty meals—for Burnside it represented a slight alleviation of a state of things which was otherwise unbearable. It was not so much that he hated discipline, and rations, and wounds, and censorship—though he did hate them—as that he was constitutionally incapable of using so little of his brains as the life demanded of him. Hoping, as he did, to get away from teaching to a professorship of comparative philology, he put up

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with being Captain Dakers' servant because it allowed him more time for reading than any other job in the army. The rests that his eyes forced him to take, he devoted to Captain Dakers.

Burnside and Jerry made the queerest combination, for they did combine, which was perhaps queerest of all. Skene's theory was that they were so utterly unlike, so removed from all possible competition, that they respected each other. Anyhow, they did not quarrel, as most servants did. Burnside immediately appreciated Jerry's lick-my-thumb cookery, and left it to him. When the division lay at Acheux, and Jerry heard Burnside bargaining in fluent French with peasants and shopkeepers, he remarked: "You can't 'arf parlee the bat!" and never again resorted to his pigeon English. Burnside was extremely anxious to learn from Jerry the race-course "tic-tac" code, which he believed to be associated with that obscure and ancient slang language, which the modern tramp inherits from the gipsy, who had it from—where? That is what Burnside wanted to know. In return for the knowledge, he allowed Jerry to win money from him at "Slippery Sam," and even to play the

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concertina. Thus Skene, puzzling his head over the problem of two-way roads east of Albert, would be roused by the strains of:

"The roses round the door
Make me love mother more," etc., etc.

Hammering on the partition of the hut they now inhabited, he would shout:

"Stop that d——d noise!"

And the noise would stop, until he went out to his rounds, to see the dumps cleared, the roads policed, straggling units redirected, when behind him would arise in the night:

"Don't chase the pore sparrows away,
You may be a sparrow some day,
But spare them some crumbs
From your ha'penny buns," etc., etc.

through verse after verse of Christmas-card sentiment, as the concertina bleated and brayed.

"I can't think why your fellow puts up with it!" he complained to his Commanding Officer.

"Perhaps he likes it!" returned that veteran, "I do!"

But Skene questioned Burnside and discovered

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the truth, and endeavoured to be more lenient in the interests of philology. He was equally mystified by Jerry's unaccustomed sobriety, amid the tangle of low back-area estaminets, until one night when he and the Captain had strolled out late to try and make up their minds as to the visibility of the dumps, to aircraft. Returning to their billet, noiseless in gum-boots, they saw before them two figures, the square, squat one, walking very wide, and depending on the tall gawky one's wooden stride. They heard Burnside's scholarly articulation:

"Now get in and lie still, you swill-pot, and sleep it off!"

"A'ri', lovee dearie, clean my bloke's belt for me!" which Burnside, whose keen head no drink could fluster, and whose puritan self-control enabled him to refuse drinks he didn't want, with a "Dam' you" if necessary, forthwith did.

So that extraordinary partnership went on.

One day, when they both had to ride up to Corps Head-quarters for detail, Captain Dakers, surveying their usually unlovely remounts, hoofs blackened, faultlessly groomed, saddlery glossy, remarked to Skene:

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"This isn't Burnside. This is your chap, teaching him what!"

"They know when they're well off, both of them!" rejoined Skene, not without satisfaction, "it's sheer devotion!"

CHAPTER XVI

Paris Leave

WHAT heartfelt prayers Skene offered up during the ensuing six weeks! The division went into the last attacks of the Somme offensive. Skene's work was dangerous enough—out every night, now running a wooden tramway that carried trench-mortar ammunition—now shepherding down batches of draggled, dazed prisoners. But he slept during the day, got some food, and did not get drowned like many an infantry man. Then suddenly without warning, he found Head-quarters packing up, the usual signs, a junior officer of Q. branch disappearing with the A.D.C. in a car—the Quartermaster-Sergeant burning returns, orders, schedules, and time-tables of the Corps they were leaving. The division was going out to rest.

The moment the attacks stopped, the rain stopped; some said it was the God of the Bosches,

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others that the gun-fire brought the rain. Anyhow, the weather became crisp and fine, and down those poplar-lined roads the division filed out.

Skene's work changed. His Commanding Officer, known throughout the division as "Uncle" on account of years and miscellaneous wisdom, had been given charge of some seventy men, unfits or technical specialists—not on any account to be called the "H.Q." Company, because there was no such unit in the list of Establishment issued from Whitehall—and the Americans had not yet shown the necessity for such a body. No, they were just "attached" or "employed," and rationed and paid as such. Uncle had been given the real job of Clearance Officer, on the lines embodied in Colonel Castle's memorandum, and was nominally responsible for half a hundred odd jobs that Head-quarters had no time, no inclination, and, so Uncle said, no ability to do.

Skene did these while Uncle made himself invaluable to the Deputy Assistant Director of Veterinary Services, for he could circumvent the climate and the mules, he could build horse standings and ovens with nothing, and steal nothing to do it with, without being discovered. He was invaluable to the A.P.M. because he could handle

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Colonials who sometimes strayed into divisional lines, and who could not understand and would not submit to English Police. Also he understood Massey Harris reaping machines, and helped local farmers, who in return might be induced to lend their fields for polo. So while the old man gave sage opinions, Skene, as a change from prisoners, and ammunition, and routes and gas alarms, did traffic and salvage, ushered units out of the Line and saw that they cleared up properly.

Day by day the War was changing. Instead of the old divisions still more or less like big families—men of one or two neighbouring counties often with their own traditions well known and observed—Skene now saw no cavalry, no cyclists—they had gone to Corps—no artillery, they had been left in the Line for the benefit of some one else's infantry, and the four regular battalions, the three territorials, and the five New Army ones, fitted out with Welsh engineers, the A.S.C. of a Scotch division, and Colonial field ambulances.

They squatted down in the valleys east of Doullens, and Uncle and Skene billeted near Head-quarters at Louches, in a château in a

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wood, on the top of the chalk cliff that overlooks the untouched medieval village bordering the stream. They had an office in the stone gatehouse that bridged the village street, and from thence Skene went, riding or cycling, every day—his job now was civilian claims for damage.

In those wattle and daub-built farms, the successive units had wrought a havoc greater probably than shell fire over the same period. The old English regular army idea of "Barrack damage" had broken down. Who was to say which of fifty successive units caused the wall of a 300-year-old barn to collapse? This brought up the question of renting permanent sites, since every one now agreed the English armies would not be in Berlin this Christmas. And, to Skene, whose colloquial French was fair, all this was interesting—not merely because it occupied the mind and did not expose the body, as the work of an infantry company officer did, but because he could feel himself of some use, somehow. The peasants liked him because he understood them and took trouble. Head-quarters liked him because he took a load of half-understood bothersome detail off their hands. Uncle was a good master. The

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officers of the French Mission, the Maires of the villages were easy to get on with.

But there was a deeper reason than any of these for the glow in his heart.

As the War was changing day by day, it was changing everybody that came within its scope. Men over thirty grew so that they could not wear pre-war clothes; more frequent, more curious and more catastrophic were the cases of men whose minds would never again fit their pre-war habits.

The education of the war was profound—it attacked the middle aged who changed as they had never dreamed of changing. A few weeks counted as years and left individuals unrecognizable. And it was permanent—there was no undoing it.

All this disturbance, psychological more than physical, demanded compensation. Habits, points of view—restraints had been destroyed. Simple enough for those who, unable ever again to become the citizens they had been, found in the swift death of the battlefield a halo that endeared them to a generation. But for others who lived on, through months—years—of shell fire

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and bombing, of Army orders and Censorship, not so simple! They had to alter if not to rebuild themselves. To a few men, soldiers by instinct like Colonel Castle, work, and more work, a little ambition, a spice of danger, but always more occupation, bridged the chasm. To many, that easy slip for Northern peoples—a little more strong drink—sufficed. Uncle, who had always taken his whack, took a little more. Whisky deteriorated less perhaps than anything during those years of stress. Life was lived outdoors, food was not scarce—Uncle was never drunk, but just cheerful every night. What one would do with such a habit on returning to civil life, did not bother men. The chance seemed increasingly remote. Whisky best, other drink second, kept many going. There were other means of recuperation—such sport as could be got—polo, football, cards in the mess—expensive trips to the nearest town to see a lady. A few read, sketched, photographed if they dared, kept pets or diaries.

Skene's trouble was different. He was worn in body, but it was his feelings, the complex inherited and acquired habits of a comfortable provincial professional man that were so injured. Ought he ever to have volunteered? Should he

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not have waited and got one of the innumerable jobs where his draughtsmanship would have kept him busy and safe at Calais, St. Omer, Abbeville, Amiens or Bethune, in one of the great departments now springing up? But here he was. Soldiering did not appeal to him, drink made him sick before it made him silly. Sports and hobbies did not go deep enough. The ordinary after-dinner jokes he let pass with a grin and a shrug. Promiscuous women did not tempt him. Madeleine did. To be cared for—to be wanted—to have some one looking for his letters—arranging to meet him—that staid, demure, yet physical responsiveness—that was the thing. He did not boast of his precious feeling, but hugged to himself the thought that although he was but a small screw in a great machine, he had his private and special Heaven, where no one else could go. He felt perfectly secure. He knew enough of France to be sure that Madeleine was not making a business or a hobby of men. It was of course impossible for him to ask himself, critically and coolly, what she was making of him.

Few men possess that best of Guardian Angels, a candid friend. And to Skene, anyway, he would have been of doubtful benefit with his

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probable: "You are an Englishman. There is only one way with a woman for you. Marry her or let her alone. In England you were born and educated, and are totally incapable of a liaison. You have no idea of what she means by marriage. You will only hurt yourself or her, or both. Let her alone!"

Skene had too good a reply: "I am saturated with the daily stimulus of this war as if I were fed on alcohol. I have just escaped from the trenches, I am living and shall probably live for years more or less under shell fire. By the law of averages, it is unlikely I shall survive. I must have this woman or go mad."

Who could have gainsaid that?

But he had no frank mentor at his elbow; not even the grim cynical Earnshaw to laugh at him. The matter was never present in concrete form to his reason—it just made a little rosy cloud in the corner of his eye, sometimes spreading over his whole vision. Passing up and down those valleys between the chalk ridges, incredibly beautiful in the clear weather, where the small-wooded, dense French plantations made a bluish sheen on the downside, and the rushes in the beds of the clear, blue-and-white reflecting streams had

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scarlet stems, where the poplar leaves were spinning like so many gold sequins—all the time he had that glow in his heart. The War lost its hold on his attention. As he laboriously waded through the assessment and verification of great piles of claims for occupation of pasture or arable, for damage to plastering of barns, or pavement of courts, he was arranging in his mind the strategy for obtaining leave.

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He wrote to the address at Amiens, a letter beginning “Chère Amie” and signed “Geo.”—for it was of course nationally impossible for her to spell or pronounce “Geoffrey.” He posted it by help of a French permissionaire in a civil post office. He waited a week, surprised at himself, slightly annoyed each time it was post time to find no reply—surprised at his perfect confidence that it would come. At last it was there, post-marked Paris, and opened by the censor.

The letter was calm and cool. She had got work in Paris. She was pleased that the War went so well. *Beaucoup de bons amitiés*. Skene was not disappointed. It was the very letter to pass the censor. He could get Paris leave. It

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was a new institution invented to ease the traffic in the Channel boats. He saw Uncle and Headquarters and got eight days' leave to Paris. He wrote to Madeleine to meet him. He got in reply a postcard with Union Jack and Tricolour entwined, inscribed "*A bientôt!*" Then, only three days before the appointed date, came a letter, beginning simply "*Chéri*"; it went on in her vigorous language:

"All men are bad devils except you. I wish to be yours altogether!" and promising to meet him on the Gare du Nord at the six-o'clock train.

So with a beating heart and a blushing face caused by a firm idea that his Quartermaster-Sergeant had read all the postcards and guessed the contents of most of the letters, Skene got into the Ford tender that should take him to railhead, and prepared himself for a freezing eight hours in the train—through Abbeville and Amiens—down to comparatively civilian Creil. It was dark at Paris.

Madeleine was there on the platform; once again he thought her slightly and advantageously aged; thinner and paler, also to her advantage; better dressed than ever, and surely glad to see him.

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In a moment the barriers of absence and strangeness were gone, and as they passed out through the dark street to catch the last taxi, he felt the warmth of the perceptible pressure of her arm, the bird-like lift of her dark and shining eyes in a face pallid between the fur of her collar and the brim of her hat. He had left the choice of restaurant to her, and soon they were in a garishly painted dining hall, which had, presumably, from its panels of naked goddesses and red plush and gold seats, begun by upholding the old "how delightfully wicked" Montmartre traditions, but had relapsed, under the influence of that gradual commercialization of Paris, into catering for the steadier custom of the clerks and better-class business employees of the district surrounding the factories and goods stations of the northern arc of the city.

Delightful to see the figure she cut among these diners! She had drunk in Paris as if born there. A briskly pleasant, dictatorial manner with the waiter, which one felt ready at the least shortcoming to break into icy acerbity, the perfection of her gestures, her complexion and her voice, where the least touch of superior tone rested on a solid basis of assured sufficiency—all were perfect

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imitations of the girl earning a good living, and conducting a successful liaison with a praiseworthy young man towards a comfortable marriage or other permanent settlement. And as Skene got further and further away from the primeval masculinity of army life, from the freezing cold and bitter loneliness of his journey, and was more and more intimately warmed by her glance, and the dinner which, instead of being delivered to him as a ration, was bestowed on him as a benediction, he thought with increasing amusement how much more of a true Bohemian he was, than she.

It was the first time during the War (save for his rare spells of leave) that he had been in a big town entirely outside the zone of operations, where civilian atmosphere was the rule not the exception. And in this new Paris, compared with the Paris he remembered fifteen years before, it was he, who, dressed in the fancy dress of his uniform, after running risks of life and death, was snatching a few brief hours of happiness, careless of the morrow; and it was she who sat there, imperturbable and unimpeachable, with clothes on the sombre side of good taste, and a bearing on the stiff side of good breeding.

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Because his dinner warmed him—because his mouth was full, because he had nothing to say that could be freely said in such a place, he was silent and made use of one of the innumerable mirrors with which they were surrounded to steep his eyes in her image, from the covering of her head (“a three-cornered affair of dark velvet—very quiet and nice”) to the point of a glacé boot, set upon the iron of the table support. What was it about her that made her so compelling? No jewellery—just one ring, one brooch, solid, old-fashioned, unpretentious—no glaring colour—no trick of gesture, no pose of features or figure. Ashen-brown hair, dark grey eyes, shining a little, under lowered lids, even, rather pallid complexion, mantling the least bit as with suppressed excitement—expression imperturbable. Nothing to catch attention, and nothing to get tired of.

That was it perhaps—character—strength of will and sureness of own judgment—inherited from pure peasant stock and preserved and hardened in the undisturbed rusticity of Flanders. She had come out, expanded, in the atmosphere of the great city where she was making her way. A hardy plant from a stiffer soil. She showed to

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advantage beside the light more obviously "attractive" women around her, with their Parisian tradition of doing their utmost to be attractive, and their inevitable Paris clothes and fallals.

The contrast between her effortless self-possession and the almost professional gaiety of the neighbouring tables moved him to convey to her what he was feeling, with one of Mercadet's jokes: "They ought to call this the Place Cliché!" She smiled so vaguely that he wondered if she understood, or again if she disapproved; she paused a moment to survey the other diners—slightly curious, slightly antagonistic, wholly critical, and went on with her dinner.

The dinner came to an end, as even good things must. She sent back the bill to be corrected, and when he had paid it, preceded him, drawing on her gloves and glancing at the waiters and the other tables as though they did not exist.

Outside, in the clear-aired bustle of the Place Clichy, which even the War could not rob of an air of wearing its cap over one eye, she chose a cinema, and they took the best seats in one of the "*spectacles de famille*" sort. She was decorously amused until the drama achieved its usual pseudo-

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tragic separation between the male and female, when she rose and said: "Listen, this representation is '*rasant*.' I ask nothing better than to go." Skene followed her into the street. He had taken a room in an old haunt of Mercadet's—a little private hotel in the Rue Biault. He asked anxiously: "Would that do?" She replied: "You deserve it!"

With the warming sense of possession that fades with frequency Skene handed her through the glass door with its English patent spring. The proprietor, a little grinning bearlike Alsatian, recognized him at once. In reply to enquiry after his health, he made the answer so often heard: "*My good sir, I lost my son!*" and wished Skene and his "*petite dame*" a very good night.

Madeleine, who had been standing a little apart drawing off her gloves, her feet at just the right angle to each other, her head at the right poise, turned and gave him the smirk a middle-aged bourgeoisie would accord a necessary institution. Even on the stairs she did not abandon the attitude, saying over her shoulder:

"Well, my friend, you have a pretty taste in hotels—it is at least quiet and altogether clean!"

And upon this the door closed behind them.

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In that clean little room with its rosy curtains and quilt, Skene sat on the edge of the bed to unlace his boots, marvelling at the grace of her raised arms as she unpinned her hat. Passing round the bed in his stocking feet, he took her from behind to kiss her lips before the fresh chill of the streets was off her face.

It would not have astonished him if she had pulled away, but instead she shook all over, and the face he kissed was deluged with tears.

.

It says much for Skene's middle-class upbringing, the most "gentle" upbringing in the world, that he instinctively slipped from the hungry lover to the kind-hearted friend, and more slowly back again from drying her eyes and doing her little services to possession of her lips, and, so far as man can know, of her thoughts and senses.

It was hours before that sudden collapse of the spirit was entirely bridged, and they lay, side by side, at peace in the cosy stillness of that little room, talking in voices such as married couples use for the last few moments before they rise.

"My poor friend, I do plague you, don't I?"

And while Skene denied it softly, by word and

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deed, she showed more rancour than he had yet seen.

"But you well understand that it is not you, but him?"

"You have no bad news?"

"No, except that I always think he has gone with some one else. Ah, if he would only let me see him, it would be all right!"

Pathetic, and abandoned woman's undying belief in her power of attraction! "Meantime, I love you much the more. You are more frank, and much more a man."

To Skene, fresh from mud and cold, from the tremble and roar of great explosions and the mean loneliness of a Nissen hut, even this qualified vow, backed with the pressure of soft shoulders against his arm, was the very gate of heaven.

.

He woke with that feeling of comfort which can only be realized by those who have slept in "gum boots" for months at a time; he rose with the cheerful certainty of having all day to do just what he liked. Madeleine, too, was in excellent spirits, no trace left of her sombre collapse a few hours before, and finishing her deft toilet before

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he was half through with his, made fun of his hot bath, his difficulty in getting his belt and boots done to his liking, and his egg for breakfast. They passed out into a frosty Paris, sandbagged and darkened, but serene and busy, as yet not over-bombarded and still possessed of taxis.

.

In infinite ease of mind and body Skene passed these few brief days of complete holiday—the completer because his companion left a whole province of his mind untouched.

Reaching him only through his less-educated senses, she led him, daylight long, from shop to shop in quest of stockings, a stole, or linen, which she consented to accept from him, and in the choice of which, he could only respect her acumen and good taste. They would pass the Musée de Cluny, the Sainte Chapelle, the Place de la Concorde, places that had for Skene associations to warrant hours of dawdling reminiscence. Madeleine was simply unaware of them, she cared more for the use and appearance of a building than for its size, more for the style and management of a shop than for its name or its pretensions; she was interested in herself, but generous of herself,

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knowing how to make herself valued, liking to see and be seen, light-hearted, stoic—ideal for him and for the occasion.

He insisted on making the pilgrimage to the Lecture Hall of the Sorbonne, to see what was, to him, *The Fresco*.

She looked at it in silence. At last she said:

"It is not, then, a church?" The atmosphere of the place had penetrated her consciousness. He explained the uses of the Sorbonne, its place in her nation's life. "No doubt it is necessary!" she admitted.

The week went like a flash.

To the last moment, she was perfect. Standing on the platform of the Gare du Nord, as the six-ten for Amiens began to move, Skene admired her, and saw how other people did the same. Restrained, attractive, mistress of herself and of the situation, her farewell was an unconscious masterpiece, a glimpse of perfection. Skene would have been miserable that journey, had he not slept like a log.

CHAPTER XVII

The Field of Arras

A WEEK later, Skene was standing as close to an army stove of the "Queen" type as he could get without burning his whole stock of clothes, which indeed, he was wearing all at once. He was in a wooden hut which his Commanding Officer had "wangled" from a Canadian Railway Company who had moved farther off.

The great cold of January, 1917, had set in, and the ground was frozen, certainly inches, some said a yard deep. Shaving was difficult and keeping still was dangerous. Over the high plateaux of the Somme district, the wind cut like a knife. The trenches were enviable, comparatively dry and sheltered from the wind.

For Skene, the problem was whether to shiver near the fire or to walk the length of the little cabin and feel how desperately cold it was at the other end, three strides away. His C.O. wrapped

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in blankets, with nothing showing but a red nose and a ragged moustache, was snoring the thankful snore of one who has enough to drink only once a week.

From outside came the stamp and bellow of the mules, and from the men's cookhouse a cheerful roar of:

“Mademoiselle No Bon
Après la guerre finie
Umptity—Umptity—umptity—um
Tous les Anglais partis.”

His week in Paris seemed years ago. So much had happened since. Far behind was the “rest” in the old untouched villages behind the Somme. He had returned to a B.E.F. that was rapidly passing out of recognition and that was never unchanged, no, not even for two days.

By the time that Christmas was over the developments that had drawn him out of the Line, to be a “Clearance Officer” had gone much further. The root idea now was, to work everything by Corps. Uncle, Skene, their men and office were to be Corps troops. This marked the disappearance from the War of the last shred of individuality.

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At the beginning there had been the personal appeal to enlist, the attraction of units, whose names or deeds called in one way or another upon local patriotism, or historical glory, or whose terms of enlistment, or the personality of whose commanders, were well known and appreciated. All this was lost to men's minds during the Somme. In the gigantic dimensions of that battle no one could remember what ground had been won by the Prince of Wales' Own Light Infantry (the Cardiff Buffs) or in what gallant circumstances the Duke of Glasgow's Carabiniers (dismounted) had been wiped out. Men learned to count not by battalions but by divisions, that did to some extent remain recognizable. Divisions, even though shorn of cavalry and cyclists, artillery and A.S.C., had been still, as to their infantry, London or Lancashire, Scotch or Colonial. But now even this was lost. Reinforcements came from anywhere or everywhere. The old badges, the old divisional signs, might still be found, but the spirit was gone. Often not even the badges and signs remained. News came of trouble, almost mutiny because Birkenhead Irish were sent to reinforce Cumberland Light Infantry, that owned nor pipes, nor shamrock. The old

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proverb of the estaminet girls in the back areas, "A Colonial private is worth a Highland lance-corporal, who is worth an English Second Loot" became deceptive. The Colonial, the Highlander, and the Englishman all came from Liverpool.

Where Skene now lay, the width of the Doullens-Arras road separated him from a Canadian Corps. They were indistinguishable from other British Troops, except for the Maple Leaf and their accent. They were unrecognizable for the old Canadian Divisions of the salient who wore slouch hats, carried their flags into action, and would salute none but their own officers.

And in and around the British Troops were now dotted the immense and growing camps of the Labour Corps—African Negroes officered by Missionaries—West Indians and Egyptians that grinned and chattered in the damp, numming cold. There were rumours of Chinese.

No longer did Uncle and Skene depend upon the small, harassed dignitaries of the division, local and as it were, tribal gods, "Corps" brought a larger if chillier atmosphere; it lived miles away and only communicated by wire or despatch rider. The people that really had to be

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feared and propitiated were the new theology—or demonology—of Roads and Railways, of Labour or Transport or farther back, Forestry or Agriculture.

Those to whom life is bearable—and they are perforce a majority—are astonished when they examine the nature of the compensations that induce them to accept the inevitable. So with Skene. Just when it became impossible for him to feel any longer that it was *his* war, to be won by his own individual sacrifice, it became possible to feel that he need not sacrifice himself either immediately or continuously. Having so narrowly escaped death, he might now live a bit and not bother. To live was not so easy. Apart from getting bombed and shelled he had to find food, drink, housing and leave. Uncle was the finest possible tutor for a young man anxious to live. He taught the three arts of war, so much more necessary than musketry, field engineering or tactics. Or were they, perhaps, part of tactics? Wangling, Scrounging, and Winning.

Wanging was the art of obtaining one's just due by unfair means. For instance, every officer and man of the B.E.F. had his allotted daily rations, his camp or billet, his turn for leave. In

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practice, to get these necessities, it was well to know the man who provided them and do him some small service—a bottle of whisky, the loan of transport (if you had any) or of a fatigue party. Wangling extended to the lowest ranks. Men wangled from the N.C.O.'s the better sorts of jam and extra turns off duty. The main stream of wangling flowed from the enormous and growing number of small units, like Uncle's, the apportionment of whose daily subsistence was at once a nuisance and an opportunity to the Supply Officers and the Railhead Panjandrums—for the bigger units, battalions, batteries, Head-quarters had to be and could be more easily provided for. But Wangling was by no means confined to troops in the field. As the War grew and grew—the contracts for supplying steel helmets to Americans, the Command of smaller Allied Armies, the very sovereignty of nations all became subject to the Wangle, so remote had become the chances of justly obtaining bare justice.

To return to the unit in the field, when its Wangle was completed, behold it housed, fed and allowed some leave. But life was still very hard—almost insupportable—to bear it, men, those fathers of invention, evolved the art of Scrounging.

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Scrounging could be defined as obtaining that to which one had not a shadow of a claim by unfair means. It was more insidious than the Wangle, but just as necessary—men scrounged the best dug-outs off one another, or off neighbouring sections. N.C.O.'s scrounged rum by keeping a thumb in the dipper while doling it out. Officers scrounged the best horselines from other units. Colonials scrounged telephone wire to snare rabbits. Nations scrounged territory or trade. It was simply done. You walked about whistling, with your hands in your pockets and a cigarette in your mouth until you saw what you wanted, and then took it. The main stream of Scrounging was for wood. The armies were provided with coal and coke and presumably intended to ignite it by holding a match to it. In result millions of men during the five winters of the War, burnt a colossal cubage of wood. It was easy to obtain. Vast quantities were being cut by an entire Forestry Corps that had rights over several Picard and Norman forests and did nothing else but provide the timber required for dug-outs, railways, roads and gunpits. No great percentage ever reached its proper destination. A little was built into huts, horse-lines or billets.

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The bulk was burnt. From the timber dumps in the great cold of January, 1917, whole stacks disappeared. If any high authority went into the matter, a dumb, putty-faced sentry was produced who had heard nothing, seen nothing, knew nothing. But even the enormous quantity taken from dumps was not enough. Farms, houses, public buildings were ransacked. Shelving, forms, ladders, carts, partitions disappeared. In the Belgian hop fields the British Army alone is said to have destroyed 1,000,000 hop-poles. Who shall blame them? Shall a soldier die of cold as well as of other things?

Wangling is known in peace time. It is a necessity of civilization, where violence is difficult and costly. Scrounging was a necessity of war, for men must live. There was another Art that was more truly an Art than either of these. For it did not rest upon necessity, but was an ornament, a superfluity, a creative effort of the mind. This was the Art of Winning. It may be defined as Stealing. More fully, it was the Art of obtaining that which one has no right to, for the sake of obtaining it, for the joy of possession.

Some say that it arose from taking millions

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of decent civilian people and planking them down upon battlefields from which the last sign of decency had disappeared, in a war so bloody and so endlessly long that the issue of it was beyond imagining. Some say it was simply the primeval joy of loot, ever present in man, and bursting out from time to time in Tudor or Elizabethan Filibuster, in Georgian Colonists, or Victorian Journalists.

As the War went on the contagion spread. Decent Flemish and Picard girls, with no particular tenderness for any one man, possessed glazed cases containing the badges of every unit in the B.E.F. Decent English boys conveyed or sent home every sort of appliance, equipment, projectile, arm—not one of which they had obtained by personal combat, but which they had found lying about and appropriated.

As Skene stamped his feet and listened to the snoring of his C.O., he looked round on their joint handiwork. The Hut, the men's hut, the coal, the oil for the lamp, had been wangled from Q.M. stores; dump guards, area commandants, Town Majors. The wood for the fire, the sack-ing on the floor, the roofing of the horse-lines, the gum boots for officers and men had been

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scrounged, who knows where—or where not. The picture of the Virgin Mary, the fire extinguisher, the arm-chairs had been won. All up and down the great open-air town from Dunkirk to Basrah it was the same. And Skene, the law-abiding, decent professional man from a country town was not ashamed.

These acts were not discussed in any abstract way by the officers and men who instinctively performed them. To any charge of moral obliquity, their defence might have run: "England needed us; we came. England wasted us; we died or survived. England leaves us here for no one knows how many years to get along as best we can. Well! we are getting along!"

Skene turned all these things over in his mind, and was not discontented. He was "in it." From "stand to" in the morning, when he staggered out in gum boots and a muffler to see the men were about and stirring, guards relieved, animals fed and groomed, to the present moment, while waiting to hear that the last of the evening ration traffic had passed, his life was full with guarding four dumps of different sorts of material and ammunition, regulating streams of traffic, collecting and classifying salvage. And behind

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and beneath the mechanical preoccupation of his daily existence, his real preoccupation was now—Madeleine, a warm spot against his heart. Two things went on, not interfering with each other—Madeleine and the War.

He listened a moment to a faint drumming noise. It sounded like 'planes. It faded. He thought: "Damn this cold. I'm fed up. I must try next time Uncle's up at the Corps and see if I can wangle another Paris leave. If I can't I must win another stove from the R.E.'s and scrounge coal at the railway!" Then he became conscious of another of the daily "new" elements of the War.

The head of his Quartermaster-Sergeant appeared in the doorway: "Bosche signalled over, sir!"

"Very good, have the gun teams standing to!"

Skene pulled down a knitted cap over the tips of his ears, wound his muffler twice round his neck and head, and shoving his hands into his pockets, went out into the piercing starlight.

Around him was a bustle of men covering the lights from fire or lamp, and "standing to" around the two Lewis Guns that stood slung on posts a few yards apart.

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In front where the double line of trees that bordered the great road melted off into darkness, the bursting shrapnel of the new 13-pounder anti-aircraft guns was visible against the blue velvet of the night. Then that familiar sound—the rhythmic groan of the Bosche bomber’s engine crept up, penetrating, immense, unforgettable—a nightmare in men’s memories, as in the first reading of fairy stories the Giant’s “Fe Faw, Fum” is to a nervous child.

For Skene this bombing was nothing new—billeted in railhead towns, halted in stations, sick in hospital, he had heard it going on around him. But to-night, the invisible bird kept circling above his head, and he could not fix the direction in which to fire. As usual, no instruction had been issued, save that the railway dump was to be guarded, and it only occurred to him after several minutes that the Bosche was probably flying on a photograph some days old, showing it full of stores, and swarming with personnel. Then came a curious shrieking whirr, the dead silence of a stopped engine; a boring as of some gigantic corkscrew into the solid earth; an explosion that seemed to tear the ground from under his feet, a rain of *débris* that lasted several sec-

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onds. His Sergeant beside him, voiced his very thought: "Big stuff, that!" He ordered fire-traversing above the dump. Flame leapt from the mouths of the two guns and their continuous rattle drowned the scuffling of the frightened mules in the transport lines. A second explosion followed farther off, then nothing more. One gun had jammed; Skene ordered the other to cease fire.

Having seen all clear, he dismissed, and went back into the hut. His C.O. had not moved a hair for the noise. Smiling, warm through, with his heart beating and his feet tapping, Skene almost wished he were back in the trenches, so infectious is Activity, so much more attractive than its pensive sister Reflection.

CHAPTER XVIII

Another Paris

IN the clear bright morning that followed the first raid on the Corps dumps a single Bosche flew over, and then retired. Apparently the enemy had gathered that he was wasting his time. The following night, though bright and clear, was quiet. Skene wrote a long letter to Madeleine, his Field Message Book on his knees, his feet on the stove until his boots scorched, while Uncle snored just out of the circle of lamplight, and outside the road was never quiet and the sentry stamped on the iron ground. Skene wrote fully and enthusiastically—not because he had much to say—she was probably not very interested in such details of his daily life as would pass the censor—but because it comforted him to write. He told her how much he loved her, how lonely he was, how he enjoyed staying with her. He explained that he could not get leave often even to Paris, though that was easier than English

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leave, but that he would try to get a couple of days off in February. He folded and franked the letter and put it in his pocket, to post it when he could do so unobserved.

In the morning "Corps people" in blue caps and red caps, seated in motor-cars, were reported to him, as he wolfed his breakfast, his porridge, his bacon and eggs, his bread and marmalade. His servant who brought him the news, left him his well-brushed British warm and his going-on-leave cap on the bench. Uncle was still snoring and Skene hurried out "clean and properly dressed" to see what these inhabitants of a higher firmament might require.

They were nice people; well shaven, well breakfasted too, one or two regular officers and several of the new "Goods manager" type of highly placed civilian organizer, who were now flocking into uniform and getting into good positions by influence before conscription caught and made infantry privates of them. They wanted new dumps, more dumps and another railway. Skene ventured to suggest that the place was already "spotted" and that the Bosche, suspicious of it, could watch and bomb it again if he saw any activity. And there was that nasty

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straight, tree-lined road that ran past it, shown on every map, visible in every photograph, visible even at night, so airmen said. Skene noticed that his remarks were not attended to and held his tongue, fearing he had been guilty of "cheek." It only occurred to him later that the nice gentlemen he was talking to simply did not understand him—did not realize what bombing meant, never having seen any. Two days later he found his half-finished letter to Madeleine. It seemed stale, inadequate. He tore it up.

So the dumps came and the railway was begun. Skene's work was doubled and trebled. The weather broke and covered him with mud. At the end of January as things were settling down, he wrote a letter to Madeleine. He read it through and ordered his horse, telling Uncle he was "fed up" with dump guarding and was going up to Corps to wangle two days' leave.

"I hear what y'say!" was the only answer. The letter in Skene's pocket said the writer wished to be with her, and had a blank space for the exact date of his leave to be filled in.

It was just before eleven when he got to the château where Corps lived and got his horse held. "Old Bill," as the men had christened that inter-

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esting experiment in Zoology, did not require much holding, having arrived at that time of life when to stand still in anything soft, nose down, occasionally taking a bite of any vegetation within his reach was all he desired. But, Skene, knowing this, was afraid for the Corps Commander's wattle mats.

Skene worked his way into the office of the Staff Captain whom he and Uncle saved most trouble, and was just beginning to talk about something quite unconnected with the object of his visit, after the approved manner in which wangling was camouflaged—when Colonel Castle, who was passing the door, looked in.

“Hullo, Skene, you'd better be getting back if you ever want to see Uncle and your fellow-criminals again!” (That was how the detachment was spoken of by those who used it.) “The Bosche don't like your camp and they're knocking it over!”

Skene saluted, ran to “Old Bill” behind the shrubbery, jerked him loose, jumped on and rode. From the wooden-jointed distance-devouring trot of the old and weary beast-of-all-trades he appeared to know that something was the matter. Or was it the common equine instinct for know-

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ing when the nose is towards home? It brought Skene in less than an hour to the cross-roads where one of his men was diverting traffic. A little farther on his servant, seated on his valise, was smoking and surveying the scenery from an untilled field. Skene pushed up beside him among the dead vegetation, and caught sight of the camp and dumps. They were all lifeless and empty and dotted with big black holes and lumps of chalky earth. In the middle of the desolation Uncle was walking steadily up and down beside the collapsed card house of the mess and office. What casualties? Two of his own men killed, it appeared, for certain; two or three more not yet discovered, but might have run off. Among the dumps, numbers not known, but "I got your things out, sir!"

At that moment, "Old Bill" stiffened under Skene. There was a tearing grinding noise. A great column of black smoke, earth and débris flew up and hung towering over their heads, followed by that unforgettable roar and patter of falling bits. Uncle turned to look mechanically and resumed his walk. Skene gave "Old Bill" to his man and scrambled down shouting, "Come out of it or I'll come to you!" Uncle shouted

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back: "The whisky came this morning! D'y' think I'd leave eleven and a half bottles to these hoboos?"

The business came to an end, Instead of dying heroically amid the débris of their camp, Uncle and Skene and their detachments spent the night gathering up fragments and moving themselves and their dumps.

It was days before life was even decent again. At last he had time to write another letter, to say how anxious he was to see her, but that he had difficulty in getting leave. He added that the War was long, but that he would soon write and say when he was coming. His own words struck him with a chill compunction. He had been so busy, he had hardly thought of her. There were rumours of an early British offensive in connection with the French, which, added to the rearrangement of the dumps and camp had kept him at it night and day. He felt he must not post the letter until he could say he was asking for leave. Uncle was late for breakfast, Skene went across to the office they had rigged in the corner of a stable, roofed-in, water tight, with scrounged tarpaulin, for the N.C.O.'s and stores.

As he called his man to get out one of the army

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bicycles, for he was going up to Corps—the field telephone jangled out. He put the receiver to his ear. It was the Staff Captain, Q. “The Bosche has walked!”

“What!”

“The Bosche has gone, we haven’t touched him for days. There’s no one in his trenches. Pack up and be at (Map Square) by noon.”

Not that day either did Skene apply for Paris leave. His letter became soiled in his pocket. He tore it up. Then came the Bosche retreat of February, 1917. The next letter he wrote was from near Arras, in full preparation for the impending battle. He wrote in unmeasured terms, explaining how he was prevented from joining her immediately. On re-reading it, it now appeared to him to have been written in an absent-minded moment. He read it and re-read it. The phrases were all he could ask, but something seemed to have dropped out of them, and there was no mention indeed of leave, much love and reflection on this terrible war—and no fourth page. He searched in vain for something to put on that fourth page, which he felt all such letters should have, but failed to find it. He never posted that letter either.

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His Corps going out to rest, he hastily applied for two days' leave to Paris, but before it could be granted, the fine spell of mid-March had come, the bombing was incessant, the movement of troops by day and by night continuous, and to crown all, the Corps moved. Whether his application was lost or destroyed he never knew. Then, one morning, he received a letter from her.

He opened it after a sleepless night and busy morning, during a spell of bright weather after snow, when it was too clear for troops to move, and he had some respite. He read it three or four times, then folded it up and pocketed it, and stared over his extinct pipe at the desolation about him, for within was a desolation greater still.

In spite of some slight attempt at concealment, in spite of cordial phrasing and hopes for a speedy meeting, this letter was simply a request for money.

Among Skene's faults there was never any meanness in such a matter; pulling out of his wallet the hundred-franc note he kept by him for emergencies; he thrust it into an envelope with a few lines on a sheet from his Field

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Message Book, stuck it down, addressed it, franked it and chucked it into a slotted biscuit tin, the pillar box to his unit.

The pale April sun sank behind the southwestern downs, and with it something bright and clear faded out of Skene's heart. The sum was nothing, he would have spent many times that on her in a single day's leave, enjoyed together. What hurt him was something deliberate and calculated that scraped his fastidiousness, robbed their liaison of all there was personal, intimate; degraded it, and covered it with the sticky dirt of "relations mondaines" advertised on the last page of a comic paper. Thankful was Skene when his servant pushed a cropped head out of the hut door to snap "Tea's on, sir!" Happier still when dusk awoke the bugles of "Stand to!" and he could think no more.

Arras, that fierce bitter battle in the snow, in part, at least, a surprise to the enemy, dwindled out in hopeless attacks in mud and filth. More deadly and more hopeless than the Somme, it had not been heralded by such preparations and boasting, and more important, it had not lasted so long. There was magic in that. If only the War had lasted for two years; if only the

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War winters had been six weeks each—if only —if only!

The effect on the mind of the quantities of prisoners and guns—the considerable extent of ground gained, all coming after the Bosche retreat, altered the whole tide of men's feelings. The exhaustion, the hoplessness, the failure of the winters after Loos and the Somme, the coming of conscription, the cold of January, 1917, all had been driving the men's optimism down and down.

Now the tide rose again. In the Bosche retreat of February men saw tangible result from the Somme—a whole great corner of the Bosche line gone—even untouched villages with civilians in them—all that had not happened since the Aisne, two years and a half ago. And on the top of this came Vimy—Vimy, the Canadians' prize "show," and men gasped—for years Vimy had been a legend in the armies. The French had said, "Our black troops have it." The English used to send over battalions, even brigades, against it. But, eventually it always rested with the Bosche. Now the Canadians were far beyond it. And while that fighting dwindled out, came the news of America joining in the War.

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Northward again—the drift of the War. All the troops that had streamed out of Flanders to Loos, and after Loos down to the Somme, were now streaming back, some tarrying at Arras to be put into the last convulsions of that struggle, but all in the end coming up, through Abbeville and the villages of the Picard downs, or up the St. Pol-Frevent-Lillers road. The next “victory” was to be further northward still, and incidentally Skene’s Corps went out of the Line for a rest. He was not slow in seeing the Staff Captain who worked the leaves. He got eight days.

Somehow, Madeleine’s face was dim. Something had come between them—the War, of course. He wrote twice hastily. He received no reply. He sent a last note with an appointment at the little hotel in the Rue Biault and set off for Paris.

Once set free from the daily round of responsibility, and preoccupation, it fared ill with Skene. All these busy months since Christmas he had hardly had time to think; he now began to ask himself questions.

Passing in the hot, fine weather through to Boulogne, Etaples, Abbeville, down to Amiens,

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he tried to recapture the thought that had possessed him, such few months before, making that same journey, thinking of the same woman—the woman who had written him those last two letters, the incomprehensible letter that said nothing in a few words, and the fatal letter that he could not bear to unfold, but kept close in the back of his wallet, the letter in which came the sentence:

“I know that you are generous, and life is so hard. I am so plagued for money, could you not help me?”

The old exploiting of the wealthy, silly young English officer by the fair but necessitous girl! He had heard of it, seen it happening so often, had told himself that he was above it, not to be entangled in such a mess and now. . . .

When he had reached a certain depth of despair, the other Skene in him, the Skene who had lived over thirty years in the world, and thirteen of them in ordinary business to earn a living, rebelled. “Why not I—as much as any of the others. I’ve had my fun, and now I want it for nothing,” and on this conclusion, there would intervene the tag from “*Alice in Wonderland*,” “nothing for nothing and precious little for six-pence.”

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With balance restored and sense of humour readjusted, he thought:

"All imagination. She's hard up—of course! Who isn't? I ought to feel flattered that she trusts me . . . in any case I'm going as fast as I can to see what's the matter!" And on this, like a wall of fog would come her silence—the silence of the last weeks; and the miserable treadmill of rumination would begin again.

It was a changed Paris—bombardment or disillusionment at failure of the Champagne offensive had affected it. There were no taxis to be had; Skene cursed, trudging with his pack up the steep stifling streets to the little hotel.

The place had no glamour to-day! Perhaps it was the May daylight that robbed it, but deep within him, Skene had a sinister premonition. No longer was it a sheltered nest, quiet resting-place of the war-worn—but simply a clean but ordinary hotel, in a rather undesirable street, where officers and others took their young women. The little proprietor in his glass cage was better dressed, more independent. He fussed over having just one room left—it was lucky Skene had written. No, no one had called—was Skene

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expecting anyone? A lady—very good. She should be shown up.

The baize-aproned, bemedalled boots took Skene up to Room No. 6 and left him to sit on the bed on the very coverlet of rose-coloured silk in the same room where he had watched her bare arms above her head. With a fatal sinking of the heart he washed and changed and waited.

It was long past eight when appetite rose out of the sea of his mournfulness, and forced him out to the brasserie in the Place Clichy to eat and above all to drink.

He was just beginning to tell himself that he did not care, when a thought pricked him to the heart—she had been detained at her office, and was now at the hotel waiting for him. Paying his bill, he left his change and ran.

The proprietor came out of his den.

No, no one had called. And Skene knew that in turning on his heel, he turned his back on an apish grin.

For hours he walked the streets, his world turned upside down. He kept flinging himself at the blackness that seemed before him, only to know that it was within him, behind his eyelids, not before his eyes.

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Why could he not do without this woman, as she without him? As he without so many others? Where was the lightness of heart with which he had left her a few months before, probably as important to him then, as now—parted with her after a few days at the call of duty—where was the ease with which for thirteen years he had done without women—too busy, too happy in his job to notice them.

He thought, with detachment, of morality, as he had so often heard it expounded, of all the moral people in the world whose virtue was never to have wanted anything with their whole hearts, as he now wanted Madeleine, but the detachment did not last him long.

He wheeled briskly and started back for the hotel. Hope reconquered him on the doorstep. Passing the cage of the proprietor without a word, he leaped up the little stairs three at a time and wrenched the door wide.

A rustle set his heart beating in his head. It was the blind disturbed by the draught from the door. The beating of his heart almost ceased and he felt sick. He flung himself on the bed and remained still for hours.

CHAPTER XIX

A Matter of Business

SKENE arrived back a day earlier than he need have done, and walked from rail-head until he caught a lorry going towards his billet. He was expecting ridicule over his early return, but the little Uncle was busy and glad to see him. One of those big reshufflings that always preceded an offensive was in progress—the whole corps was going into the Line again, and every one must move.

After some days, Uncle and Skene found their appointed place in a small industrial town lying just inside the British trenches, one of those cotton-spinning and mining centres that make the country round Lille like a leisurely imitation of Lancashire.

Dangerous to hold on account of the number of casualties possible in the narrow streets, costly and difficult to attack, it was left alone by both sides as much as possible. The British allowed some hundreds of civilians to remain in the less-

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bombarded streets and work the one or two factories that were still being run.

At the western end of that town, touching the river bank, was the wreck of a miniature garden suburb. A quadrangular walled-in space giving northward on the river contained a house or two in the architectual style associated with housing reform, a model infant school, shrub-planted walks, and, most important, an asphalt tennis-court, dry and firm in all weather, and roofed in, making a splendid dump. Here in the cellar of a model house half-destroyed by shell fire—social reform murdered—they made their Headquarters; and here towards the end of May they heard the bombardment that preceded Messines.

For Skene the War had become a regular business. At dusk every evening he went out to visit his men on the four bridges and the six dumps for which he was responsible, to see that the ration traffic cleared itself, to settle disputes and evacuate casualties. He returned at midnight, and had a night-cap with Uncle. He was out at "stand-to" in gum boots and a British warm over pyjamas, to see that things did not get slack. There was salvage to be sorted, correspondence to deal with, orders to issue in the

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morning; if he had not a journey to settle some claim for damage to civilian property or to see Corps or other Head-quarters, he got the remainder of his sleep. In the afternoon there was nothing to be done but keep everybody under cover. Old soldiers like Skene and Uncle knew that to be seen meant long-range shelling and destruction of the happy home. As soon as the morning mist had cleared, nothing was to be seen of the little camp—no white posts, no brick pathways. The men on the bridge-guard were screened, and the horse-lines camouflaged. Yes, this phase of the War became mere business—even to the early morning cup of tea, and the Sunday afternoon off. Skene, alas, had leisure to think over and over what had happened to him. He became silent, brooding, dully mechanical. He received no letter. He no longer expected one. He had two hopes—the end of the War or the end of his life. He began to think.

He had plenty of time to think, going about on duty with his orderly or N.C.O., through the grass-grown streets of the three-parts deserted town, picking his way among shell-holes or fallen tiles by the light of the Bosche flares, or of the bombardments where the fighting at Messines was

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flickering out, and that at Passchendaele being prepared—or in broad daylight, when he followed those same streets, keeping under the lee of the houses, so that any odd shrapnel or tiles flying about should miss him.

Or when he set off riding, or in the box car, with or without Uncle, to Corps or Division, to argue with staff people about orders or returns; with farmers about horse-lines or barns destroyed; or even into the town at times to dine with passing units to whom he had been able, and was always willing, to do a kind turn. All the time he thought—stopping to speak to sentries by dumps or bridges, or to staff officers—stopping to watch files of men and limbers passing dangerous spots—stopping to watch games of bridge in cellars, to measure with his eye how many posts, how much brickwork, what width of corrugated iron must be made or destroyed to allow English-speaking Tommies and mules from Lord knows where to live in French factories or barns or pastures or copses, until they were sent away to be killed.

He thought and thought and began to see so clearly how the whole thing had come about. He saw why *Perfide Albion* or *Gott Strafe England* had always been on the lips of other

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peoples, a curse at the extraordinary luck of the sea-grit country from which he came—where climate and temper, lack of foreign invasion, new paths of knowledge, and a world-wide Empire, obtained from discoverers by purchase or settlement, had all combined to give England, in a sort of triumph of lucky expediency, the lead of the industrial era—so many harbours, so much coal and iron, such a hardy, pushful people that the whole world spoke her language, borrowed her money, used her ships.

So extraordinary had been her luck that, when the World War came, her children, like Skene, entered it with an ingrained romanticism possible only to those who live in comfortable leisure, with enough to eat and drink, no frontiers, and plenty of novels; presently to find as the struggle lengthened and lengthened, that they were fighting a war that their own luck had rendered inevitable perhaps—a war of life or death for their business and prestige, on other people's ground. Could any luck be more colossal than that?

Further than this he seldom went, and used to say—"Well, I don't care, here I am, and must stick it!"

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The thought of Madeleine was at first simply an everlasting ache. Skene, whose pleasures lay in the imagination, supported on a slight basis of reality, could find no comfort in the ordinary promiscuity of the base or railhead towns. If he could not have Madeleine, he must go without. He began to recognize that he was not dying of it; then to see that here too he was the Lucky Englishman. To have had her at all had been a lucky accident, a pleasant coincidence—nothing more! How could there be a permanent relationship between an Architect in an English county town and the daughter of a Flemish farm?

And the summer wore on, and hope in men's hearts began ebbing again. After all, it was only the hope of an early ending that was left.

The Bosche retreat, the capture of Vimy, the French Champagne offensive, had been but qualified successes when they were not ghastly failures.

And it was now patent that the great Ypres offensive was a failure. Begun too late, with the old obvious methods of gigantic concentrations of troops impossible to hide, and colossal bombardments that even the mules in the lines and the birds on the trees could not possibly

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mistake, it had almost alarmed the Bosches, who of course had made corresponding efforts to meet it.

By the end of August men were talking of another winter. The Russians were giving way. The Americans were not arriving. Skene, moving among the farms in the back area, would hear from "reformed" soldiers, or men on leave from the French front: "It's all very well—one more offensive—and we shall have no more men!" Some French troops were fighting between Ypres and the sea, beside the English, liking it as little as anyone else and making prodigious sacrifices to gain a few yards of unrecognizable "ground."

From the British front Skene heard no better news. In the offices at Corps Château, he would hear officers saying: "I suppose we shall really go on fighting, if we don't get through this time!"—"this time" being one of the weekly attacks made under the direction of an Army Commander, whose renown was enshrined in the doggerel:

"All Hell's Bells!
Butt in anyhow,
Kill all your Infantry,
Get some more from some one else!"

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The services, the bases, the camps in France or England were raked for men and still more men. Orders to re-examine ever more drastic came to Corps, and just missed Skene because he was too useful, Uncle because he was too old.

There was another change too in the nature of the War. The line of destruction could barely lengthen—it stretched from sea to sea—but it broadened and deepened to three or four times its old size. Not only where the quasi-successful offensives left miles of weed-growing, evil-smelling desolation, but in sectors like that held by Skene's Corps, on the back edge of the bigger battle, where the old trench warfare was still more or less in practice, the danger zone had greatly extended. In Skene's time, troops never came back farther than the outskirts of Ypres, or the mining villages east of Bethune; "rest" in railhead towns like Poperinghe or even Albert, was rest indeed. Now towns twenty miles from the Line, and of course Paris and London, to say nothing of Amiens and St. Omer and Calais, were bombarded with guns or air-craft of ever-increasing calibre. It seemed that there could never be any end to the War. Collapse of one side or the other, for want of men, money, material, or

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courage, wasn't working out. The nations were always willing to go one better under any demand made on them, and business boomed. The War seemed illimitable. From Karlsruhe and Cologne to Paris and London; from Vladivostock, over all Asia and Europe to New York and San Francisco; from Scapa to Cape Town and the Pacific Islands. And it had become a different army, a conscript army that carried on the War in France.

Superficially there was not much difference. The old volunteer army had been of all ages, and all degrees of fitness; those who succeeded them were much the same. The last classes to come out showed rather less spring and good humour, perhaps, but on the other hand they never regarded the War in any sense as a picnic. Their one thought was to get it done. Apart from this they were the same hard-elbowed, music-hall-song-singing lot. One night, watching a battalion coming out from the Line, just north of the river, where it became moderately safe, Skene seemed to see a ghost, with a ghost's voice and laugh, standing beside the muddy way.

"Good evening sir!" he said, going up to it.

By the light of the Bosche flares, a drawn face

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was turned. But Skene was right. It was Thomas, now a major.

Skene took him to the garden suburb—a changed Thomas.

He seemed to have grown, but he had really only become extremely thin. He still had all the engaging qualities acquired at Public Schools. He was charming to the garrulous and fuddled Uncle (whom he must have thought an unqualified old reprobate), charming to Skene, and gave him news of the old battalion, of which he was laughingly proud to be, with the Regimental Quartermaster-Sergeant, the only survivor. He ticked them off on his fingers, from the Colonel to Mansfield. "Earnshaw's still alive," he said, "and you! You're the lucky ones! And jolly glad you are, and here's your very good health, and yours, sir!"

The duty orderly put his head under the waterproof sheet.

"Horse transport with materials, sir, and can they put it on B dump?"

Thomas rose with Skene and they went out together. "Back to our jobs! How queer we should feel without 'em!" was the last thing Skene heard him say.

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He was killed, of course, at Cambrai, but the War went on.

A few days later Skene had another ghostly visitor.

It was a blustering morning, too much wind and flying cloud for aeroplane observation, and he had "gingered" Uncle up to having a thorough sanitary inspection. Together they had tramped those grass-grown streets, visited every police post, spoken to every gendarme, chaffed the little Communal Secretary in his sand-bagged office. Uncle stopped to lunch with a mess of officers billeted in the town. Skene came home to the garden suburb to see that everything was smooth. He called for food, dived into the dug-out, and saw an officer sitting there.

It was Earnshaw—a little stouter, a little balder, but flushed and with blazing eyes, in the devil of a temper. He only said "Hallo!" Skene answered with: "Have a drink. There'll be some grub directly."

Over two chipped enamel mugs of whisky and water, Skene went on: "Well, old man, how are you and where are you, and all that sort of rot?"

Earnshaw replied: "I want you to do me a favour!"

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"Why of course. What is it?"

"Put me under arrest!"

"Burnside," shouted Skene, "look sharp with lunch for two!"

Earnshaw stuck out his jaw.

"I mean what I say. Will you?"

"Anything you like, old man, but what for?"

"Do you remember, when we were with the battalion, that you were sent off to buy. . ."

"Don't I just—nightshirts— The whole brigade called us the Pyjama Fusiliers!"

"Do you remember picking me up in a car?"

"Very well. You'd been stealing bricks!"

Earnshaw thumped the table, and the two mugs jumped.

"Dammit, you're as bad as the rest. I'd been *buying* bricks to save my mules!"

"Of course, jolly good standings you made."

"Well, they've raked that up."

"What after—let's see, eighteen months?"

"Raked it up. The dam' Requisition Service, or whatever parcel of fools it may be, wouldn't pay on the chit I had given."

"Red tape—awful—I know," murmured Skene, who knew better than "I told you so."

"So I paid—paid out of my own pocket. I'm

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not complaining of that. I saved the mules!"

"You're a good sort, old Millgate!"

"Had to go through a Court of Inquiry, of course. Ever held one?"

"One or two." Skene omitted to say that they were generally upon cases of theft, for fear of upsetting his friend.

"Well, then it seemed that I had conveyed merchandise out of France into Belgium. Owing to the time these Requisition people had taken to NOT pay for saving the lives of mules, old Vander what's-his-name the Brick-maker——" Earnshaw stopped to masticate pork chop and haricot.

"Brickadier!" suggested Skene, but Earnshaw was past noticing.

"—had gone to his Deputy in the Chamber, and he'd told the Customs people——"

"Of course there was a Douane post——"

"I'm not saying there wasn't. I'm only saying it's war time. I'm only saying that it's not worth while killing mules yourself with greasy feet and swelled hocks, when the Bosche will kill 'em for you with shrapnel. Well, they wanted another Court of Inquiry to satisfy the French Chamber and the King of the Belgians and God

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knows who, and I kept tearing the correspondence up. I'm on a Railway Laying Company, now, we've been doing a mile a day, all spiked, for this precious offensive up north. I was sent for, to Corps. I thought I was going to get the M.C. for Railway Laying under fire, and instead, it was all about this Customs-house business. A dam' young swine who'd been out here about ten minutes wanted to know why I didn't reply to his chits. I told him all right!" Earnshaw nodded. "I told him what I thought of him, and this offensive and the army and the War. I told him I'd see one of the members for Lancashire. I told him to go to hell."

Skene reached for his friend's dirty plate, gave him a clean one full of fruit salad, and pushed over the biscuits.

"He said it was mutiny, and all that, so I told him where to find me and cleared off. Now if you'll put me under arrest, I'll wait until they come for me. . . ."

Then queerly, almost emotionally:

"You know, Skene, if I've got to be arrested, I'd rather be arrested by you. I'll go quiet."

Skene wiped his mouth, and swung out of the dug-out. On his way across to the Signal dug-

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out, the voice of Earnshaw pursued him, high and excited, the voice of a man who seldom uses it, its verbiage starred with Americanisms, and trailing off very near a "Ba Gom!"

"We've been out here two years and more; what's it been but waste of men and waste of animals and waste of materials and nothing done."

Skene rang up Corps, asked for Colonel Castle and told him the whole story, ending:

"He's such a useful officer, sir, surely something——"

The answer came.

"You might teach him manners, not to mention discipline. We can't have junior officers shouting and storming all over Corps Headquarters."

"No, sir!"

"He ought to go to Mesopotamia, but send him in your box car to railhead. I'll have a warrant to meet him at R.T.O.'s. We want some Railway men for Forestry. Mind, I don't promise."

Skene was beginning thanks, but the receiver was replaced. In half an hour Earnshaw went to railhead in the box car. An hour after that a

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young man in a Vauxhall staff car came to enquire for him. Uncle interviewed him:

“And who might you be?”

“Deputy Assistant Provost Marshal Ump-teenth Corps!”

“Ho, well we don’t keep spare officers here. Try the first turn to the right before the bridge. He may be that way.”

Twenty minutes later, Skene saw that young man in the same Vauxhall, still alone, going Corpward.

“You’ve been misleadin’ Corps staff, Uncle!”

“Well, I gave him the road straight to the trenches,” Uncle said. “He’d never been there, and I thought it might do him good.”

CHAPTER XX

Fly-by-Night

A FINE evening, on the edge between summer and autumn, dim soft blue above, red glow on walls and trees, and along the ground, a filmy mist. Skene and his Quartermaster-Sergeant were putting together, from wires and telephone messages received from Corps and elsewhere, the evening's duties, so many parties of men and officers, so many loads of materials to be seen, checked and directed rightly. "Bosche over, sir, arter the balloon!" At the same moment, the Lewis gun at the bridge struck up its demon rattle.

Skene turned to look. The enemy 'plane had made a sort of pecking dip at the grey shape of the "sausage" balloon still clear in the dusk, against the pale sky. A whiff of smoke and a spurt of flame. "'Ere he come!" "T'laad's joomped!"

Sure enough, high in mid-air, the shape of a

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parachute with its tiny burden had sprung like one of the magic flowers of the Japanese conjuror, and sailed with slow gyration, downwards, heading, it seemed, straight for the river. Then, swinging aside, the top-heavy-looking mushroom of pink silk settled slanting down the scarred avenue of the Bethune road. Skene and his corporal raced on signallers' bicycles over the pottolèd pavé. Some gunners from a neighbouring battery were already hanging on the cords and folding the unwieldy thing.

"T'laad" seemed tolerably bumped and bruised, and had sprained his shoulder when the parachute had taken his weight up with a jerk. Skene had the little Ford box car out and sent him off to his unit, just as a very clean and capable mechanic dashed up in a cycle-side-car to take charge of the parachute. The fallen aeronaut, called back: "If I come back to this crush, I'll ask you to come and dine with us!"

Not many weeks passed before that invitation came, and on the appointed day, at dusk, up rolled a sumptuous Crossley. Skene left his section and his conscience to "Uncle," and went spinning over the Route Nationale, to where, carefully placed far from church, windmill, rail-

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way or main road, the aerodrome was spread on uncultivated clover, dotted with marquees, and striped with camouflage. His host explained: "We're such a small mess at the Section, I thought you'd rather come here!" Waiting for the offensive, five squadrons and a balloon school were jammed together. The great hangars and workshops, the tenders, cars, cycles coming and going reminded Skene of a goods station. But no railway ever displayed such costly efficiency. He was taken to a marquee where a gramophone was being accompanied on the piano, and two smooth-faced schoolboys were playing diablo. They all seemed schoolboys. Skene and the Doctor and the Quartermaster were the only men in the place over thirty. Yes, and the tragedy of that! There was an atmosphere of waiting. An orderly fixed a blue-pencilled list to the tent-pole. And one by one, these pale, slim boys, with their blue-circled eyes, went up and looked at it. Curiously matter-of-fact and fatalistic that quiet procession! Then those who were playing diablo began again, those who were drinking drained their glasses, and ordered another; a new record was set on the gramophone. "List of patrols for to-morrow!" said Skene's host, Car-

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ruthers of the balloon. They went in to dinner.

The faces round the table were impassive, eyes fixed on plates, very little conversation went on. Coffee appeared, two or three of them retired amid a chorus of "Cheerio! old thing, I'll come and see you off!" "They're the first lot; they'll be over Lille before it's properly light," explained Carruthers.

Restraint seemed lifted. The Doctor and the Quartermaster were the next to go. Some one put a ragtime record on the gramophone. Some one else ordered a round of liqueurs. A tall boy, with Yeomanry badge in his lapel, whom everyone called "Barney" (explaining: "because he owns a bulldog"), leaned over to Carruthers. "What about an evening off? I'm not on in this act!"

"Depends on what you mean by 'off.' I may have to go up to-morrow, and so may you!"

"Oh—to-morrow! It's to-night!"

In that "to-morrow" was the reason why English air-fighting was so irresistible. Skene, thinking of the traffic on his bridges, with no better guidance than "Uncle," said he must be home by midnight.

"Oh, but we'll drive you home!"

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"I can walk really. I come from the Infantry!"

"So have heaps of us, but you can't possibly walk!"

Carruthers, wavering, put in: "What'll we go in? They'll never give you a tender, Barney!"

"Simplicitas is my motto! There's a tender going into St. Blanque with the mails—*compris*?"

To Skene it seemed like proposing to go to Boulogne or Folkestone.

"It's over twenty kilos back, and not even in the Army area!"

"My dear old Footslogger" (Barney took his arm) "nothing can stop the R.F.C."

Skene buttoned his British-warm with a certain zest. To avoid attracting attention they were to walk in twos down to the Motor Transport park, a few hundred yards away. The night was dark and fresh, and the breeze rising. Some one stood a last round of drinks. A high square tender swung off its asphalt stand. Barney was driving. In they scrambled. Past a British sentry and a French gendarme, the steel-studded double wheels of the tender hissed pleasantly along the Route Nationale, over a railway crossing and along an

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avenue, through villages, past camps, under the shadow of a high tower, into the narrow streets of St. Blanque. They were dropped in the square at another mess, some lines-of-communication Head-quarters, where they drank whisky. Then out again, through narrow streets, to a spiked door over which shone the Red, White and Blue of one of those establishments to which, in deference to bishops at home, British officers were forbidden to go. About as much attracted as by a butcher's shop, Skene saw nothing for it but to follow into a big, square room, where, to the grinding of a desolating waltz, some officers were giving an exhibition of the then novel Jazz. Skene took a tumbler of champagne that had never seen Epernay, from a houri in a garment swathing her from below the breasts to the thighs. The noise, the smoke, of fumes and alcohol and scent made him want to vomit, but he sat squarely on a dilapidated ottoman, keeping those unattractive attractions at a distance by fluent French, which drove them to describe him as "muffle" or "mauvais farceur." A quarrel had arisen. Skene saw his chance, unbolted the door and slipped out into the clean night air. He had hardly got outside before two red-capped English

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military police and a couple of French gendarmes filed into the house. The English Sergeant, an immense Metropolitan policeman, called over the mob's head: "Meen-wee, Madame, fermee!" The French "Brigadier," with the special surliness of his kind, grunted: "Fermez votre boite, mon de Dieu!" thumping the floor with his scabbard.

Some had to find clothes, others to settle for wine, or conclude arguments. Skene, smoking his pipe outside, watched. He found Carruthers, bemused with drink, at his elbow, and Barney, as alert as if he had never had a drop. "Where's young Cumming?" (a youngster from a county regiment who had come with them in the tender). "Did he go upstairs?"

"I didn't see him. Besides, he was keen on the dark one—what's her name?—wears a yellow thing! She was booked to-night, I heard Madame say!"

"Then he's not upstairs; he's a regular little thing in his habits!"

"Bet you he's gone back to the tender!"

"Let's go and look!"

Skene went too. Uncle must keep awake for once and see to things. The tender was standing in the Square, like a bathing machine on a prom-

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enade. The driver was singing gently to himself; going round to flood the carburetter, he fell across the bonnet and lay there, laughing.

"Tight!" commented Barney: "here you, get into the tender!" The man obeyed with the sketch of a salute. A sleepy voice under the hood protested. "Is that you, Cumming?" called out Carruthers. "No, I'm going!"

They thrust the tipsy driver on one side, and peered in with Barney's torch. An Infantry officer was lying across the seat with his feet on his pack. "Lord!" cried Barney, "who are you, and what the devil are you doing here?"

"You said you'd take me on to Boulogne. . . ." Then, with weary wakefulness: "Oh, it wasn't you, it was another chap!"

They stood and stared. Overhead, a night bomber droned. The drunken chauffeur snored. The clock of the baroque church struck—"one." Then Carruthers said:

"134 were sending down to pick up one of their fellows. I bet you Cumming's got into their tender. He'll be half-way to Boulogne by now!"

Barney said: "Hell! Cumming and I are due out together at nine. We can do it and we d——d well must. Come on!"

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Skene protested feebly. "Look here, I must leave you chaps and get back on my own. I really can't take a trip to Boulogne when I ought to be back with my Clearance Post!"

"You awful old slop," was all the answer he got. "How d'y'think you're going back to your billet through a dozen police posts? And you can't stop here. You'll get arrested. Get in!"

Out over the cobbles, under an archway, and away on a wide road between trees. Skene could tell by the gradients that they were out of Flanders, further from the Line than he had often been. Under the hood next the sleeping chauffeur, he talked to their "guest," as Barney called him. The boy was dazed and worried. He had had no leave for over six months, no sleep for two nights. He wanted to get home. "D'you think we'll get there before the boat goes?" he kept asking Skene, "because I don't want to miss it!" with a quiet fatuity which the War had taught to a whole generation.

Suddenly, round a bend, their headlights encountered another pair as strong. The brakes shrieked. It was the other tender with young Cumming. The chauffeur had found him asleep

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behind, assumed that it was his proper passenger, and started. When Cumming awoke and realized with a pilot's "sense" that he was going the wrong way, there had been a scene, almost a panic. Now there was corresponding joy. They said "good-bye" to their "temporary gentleman," as Berry called him, and started back. At three they were recrossing the Grand Place of St. Blanque. At four they were at the aerodrome, having hot coffee and sausages in the nipping cold of dawn.

While they were eating off tin plates in the Mess Kitchen, one of the quiet boys who had gone to bed early came and put his hand on Barney's shoulder.

"All right, old thing?"

"Tight as a rivet—I mean right as a trivet," Barney spluttered: "Such a game, believe me, friends, is hardly worth the playing!" And nodding "good-bye" to Skene, he went across to bathe and sleep.

"A rum pair!" commented Carruthers. "Division of labour. Barney does all the drink and devilment, and his chum stays at home and looks at the clock. But neither will go on patrol with-

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out the other!" Then, as if he had been guilty of an exhibition of intelligence, he hastily added: "Very glad you were able to come; good-bye for just now!"

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At five Skene was slipping along to his billet. It was too light to take the tender nearer the line than Deporter's farm, and he walked the last half-mile. His faithful Corporal was awake, at the entrance of the Garden City. All was well, Skene thanked God. He felt very cold and sleepy. Overhead, two planes were droning out toward the enemy, two little bright-coloured insects crawling on the breast of the soft-lit dawn. The grey shape of the observation balloon belied up to the end of its attachment, like some monster pursuing them. Skene thought of the men up there and somehow envied them. In the cold fit of dawn, tired and empty, he wished with all his heart he were one of those thoughtless boys, fooling away the dull hours of the evening and riding the clouds of the morning to imminent death.

Stale scent and tobacco on his clothes—a dab of powder where one of the "attractions" of St.

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Blanque had leaned against him, it was like some grinning mockery of the one woman he wanted, then, at the cold hour, to put her arms around him.

CHAPTER XXI

The Cousin of my Uncle

AT dusk one evening, autumn dusk, grey, misty, still, Skene, off duty for once, was moody, smoking his after-tea pipe, when he heard a hail from the northern shore, "Hi, digger!"

Across the darkening water were two high-shouldered, slouch-hatted figures—"Anzacs," famous already at Gallipoli and Bullecourt, about to achieve greater fame at Passchendaele and Villers Bretonneux.

All Skene knew of them, then, was their splendid physique, their fine fighting qualities, and the tact needed to manage them behind the Line. He hailed back, "Hallo!" and waited.

"We are coming across!" And sure enough they came on a sort of raft, propelling themselves with a spade and a bit of board, to the remains of the model suburb's plaster steps.

Quite against orders to cross corps boundaries in this fashion!

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"What do you want?" hailed Skene.

"We are looking for my Uncle Jake."

"Well, you won't find him here. This is the Umpteenth Corps post."

"Is it now?" came the reply. "If you'd only said that before, we'd have written and asked King George before we ventured to approach."

The other added: "Steady her, will you! I don't want to swim!"

Skene made no movement. The less voluble of the two, balancing the craft with difficulty, added:

"Don't mind him, digger. He's been drinking out of a bottle marked 'fixatif' in the hopes it contained vin blanc. It's a real uncle we're after."

"Well, who are you, anyway, and what do you want?"

The voluble one with the spade answered:

"I'm Sam Dakers and my servant here is Andy Dakers, my brother, and we are looking for our Uncle Jake, —th Canadians."

"Oh, that's all right. You'll find *him* here."

"Now, how clever you are! We knew we should. We've known it for weeks, only your brass policemen wouldn't let us over the bridge."

"No, those are his orders," said Skene.

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"You needn't tell me. Well, we've been obliged to take the door off the estaminet with the Greek name."

"Greek name?"

"Well, it looks like the sound of the name of the old man who used to keep donkeys at Cairo."

They got ashore, and hitched what Skene saw to be, in truth, a large yard-door from some agricultural building, to the steps, with a piece of barbed wire.

Sam, the talkative one, whom Skene perceived to be an officer, walked on one side of him on their way to the billet, while Andy, the private, walked with no more ceremony on the other. Sam continued sweetly:

"So you thought we were practising for the cinema?" Skene coughed. Perhaps what was called the cinema element did not come from the influence of the cinema on the colonies, but from the influence of the colonies on the cinema!

Uncle no sooner saw the visitors than he lifted his curved pipe from beneath his shaggy moustache and said slowly:

"Blank me if it ain't Alf's boys!"

"So it is, Uncle Jake—and fancy your dragging

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your sixty years into the great European conflagration!"

"I'm as good as most. Burnside: Tea—a lot, quick!"

Such tea-drinking and whisky-drinking! Skene sat in the background and listened and mused.

"Well, how's Sis?"

"Last time Mum wrote, she said we was to give her love when we saw you; do you remember when you fastened the Chinaman's wooden collar on Shepheard!" How many meetings like this—since the War began—of nephews with uncles, from thousands of miles apart! And there it was, the simplicity, the shy good temper, the sufficient brutality ready to show on certain pretexts, the individual self-reliance. Those two went back very late, and after seeing them safely past his policemen on the bridge, Skene went his evening round warmed all through.

Two days later, the two nephews were back again, this time with wire netting and cable.

"We thought it was such a pity your lovely tennis court should be wasted, Uncle Jake, and Andy had to go to St. Omer, so he brought these back."

From a sack they drew four racquets and a box

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of balls a year old. With broom and shovel they cleared the required space, marked out the court, and strung their net on two pit-props won from the nearest dump.

Then began for Skene one of the happiest months of the whole War. At night, his rounds were long and heavy. In the morning there were reports, orderly room, detail of all kinds. But as the sun climbed high above the grass-grown streets and deserted marshes, there was silence and abandonment. The Bosches were quiet at this hour, his own men asleep or on duty. Then would come the whistle of Sam or Andy and the hauling of the raft across, and instead of a restless afternoon of brooding and boredom, a hard, fast game that made him sweat, and sent him happy and quiet-minded to the evening's work.

All too short those weeks of jolly comradeship and indomitable good humour. More men were wanted, and more men; the Australian Corps went off and Sam and Andy with it.

From Ypres to the sea, there was raging a new bombardment, greater in extent if not in intensity, than the historic gun-fire of Verdun and the Somme.

The fabled German artillery was not only

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equalled, but outmatched, by day; the ground shook all night; thirty miles of horizon were lit by flashes. Andy, returning from duty in the north, had seen the French pouring through above Poperinghe.

The weather broke again on the very morning of the Australians' assault; and the peace of Skene's sector, a byword in France for three years, was broken too. The Bosches, how nearly beaten few of them guessed, began their systematic retaliations.

Skene was called out one drizzling afternoon to find one of his bridges half-blown down and his policeman lying in the road with his head a little further on. This was only the prelude. Having failed, by some tiny detail, to become a final victory, the great offensive of the North sank and wallowed between the muddy ridges of Passchendaele and Moorslede. The weather became more uncertain, the Germans more obstinate and resourceful. Bombardment by day, bombing by night, exceeded the Somme offensive of the previous year, the so-called Line became nothing more than an impassable chequer of gas-sodden, water-logged craters defended by machine-guns. Thousands of all races, from all corners of the

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earth, were working on the roads. The traffic in men and materials was enormous.

As the low ridges of Flanders were conquered yard by yard, hopes rose, wavered and rose again. Uncle Jake was always confident. Skene was merely thankful that their billet lay out of range of the lesser artillery, and was too inconspicuous for the great guns that were turned on railway-depots and railheads, miles in their rear.

One rain-washed morning, the post orderly brought a thin-papered besmudged note in indelible pencil. It was from nephew Sam.

“Andy has got it bad, in the Countess’ Hospital near St. Omer.” Uncle Jake, who hated death-beds, would rather Skene went, and they were still talking it over when a hail came from the northern bank, and Sam himself on a raw-boned, mud-caked mule shouted in the teeth of the wind that he had forty-eight hours’ leave. . . .

That settled it. Skene jumped on a civilian bicycle that had been won no one knew how, pedalled across the bridge and joined Sam on the Aire road. They reached railhead and a friendly Colonial R.T.O. within an hour.

In a soiled and broken-windowed first-class compartment Skene brooded over the strange,

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vivid, absorbing life so many millions were living in conditions varying from those of the Garden of Eden on a wet day to those of a broker's man in a bankrupt boarding-house. It seemed to him that never could the intimate associations of the two years he had thus passed go from him, and that for always after there would be two races of men—those who had been in it, and those who had not.

It was still early afternoon when they stood in the pale twilight of a marquee, before a narrow bed, where what seemed but the skeleton of the big-boned Andy was propped against his pillows, breathing little short breaths with great difficulty.

Nurse and Doctor were there. But why the padre in the corner, and an obviously English girl in neat, dull-coloured clothes, whose face Andy never quitted with his glazing brown eyes, while she leant over him, supporting him with her left arm, and holding his clasped hands with her right?

On being brought into the casualty clearing-station, the injuries to Andy's backbone and lungs had been recognized as fatal. When he had with difficulty comprehended this, he had made it understood that he wished the nurse who had

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been on night shift, when he was brought in, to marry him then and there.

So, that great gaunt man, whose hair and eyebrows appeared impenetrably black against the sunken pallor of his flesh, whose great powerful bones protruded through the moist, flaccid skin, was married to a plain, kindly girl from the suburbs of a manufacturing town, the last beautiful thing his primitive, boylike spirit was to desire in this world, while she guided his trembling fingers through the changing of rings, and sealed her promise with a kiss on his forehead.

The nurse on duty put a screen around them; others withdrew. After a few hurried words about the necessary papers, Skene and Sam went out to the poplar-lined road leading to Hesdin.

They plodded along towards the railway station, Sam crying into an enormous khaki handkerchief.

And just then they were hailed from a Flying Corps tender by Carruthers of the balloon section, who was going down Skene's way with supplies.

Sitting in the back of the tender, going about twenty miles an hour through the autumn dusk, Sam dried his eyes and maintained a silence broken only by gruff monosyllables.

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"Luckier I than he," thought Skene. "To him the extinction of life must seem horrible, he has so much of it; to me—what do I care?"

Indeed it seemed to him that the fading out he had just witnessed was a fortunate release. What would he not give to discard his aching nerves and rheumatic bones in the arms of some one who at least looked as if he were all-important?

Carruthers was saying, "Old man Fritz is beat—he can't hang out more'n another fortnight!" Skene thought: "A good job, too; everyone's had enough!" To this had the crusade against Germany dwindled—the War for Civilization!

Next evening, by candlelight in the dug-out, while Uncle and Sam, with some gunners from the neighbouring battery, played poker, while the shells whistled and the planes droned overhead, he sat down and wrote to Madeleine.

He found great difficulty in beginning. And when he had begun, he found great difficulty in going on.

He was sitting on his bed, a wire mattress scrounged from a derelict house. The circle of light from a wangled lamp fell on the players' cropped heads and soiled waterproofs. Sam's

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hands looked enormous. Uncle uncorked another bottle of whisky. At a louder crash than usual outside Skene called the duty orderly:

"Where was that?"

"Right over, sir, near the old bath-house!"

"Clear of the bridge?"

"Yes, sir, a good bit!"

Skene turned back to the paper which he had headed, "*Ma chère Madeleine*," "*Madelon chérie*," and now, in a last attempt, "*Chérie Made—!*" He got no further. Some one turned on the gramophone; it made him think of those early days when "*To-night's the night!*" had been all the go. And back came the ghostly armies of the first year, the men not only dead but buried and forgotten. Ah! Well! He gulped his whisky and watched the players. More in a game of poker than in any comfort he could get from Madeleine! What was the good in writing to a woman and asking her to comfort him? What could she do?—what had she done?—be nice to him, perhaps, see him on leave, tantalize him, use him for her own inscrutable ends with that so simple cunning of an unreflective woman living a hard life. He wrote: "*It's a*

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long while since I heard from you. I am sick of this, and would like to see you again!" crossed it out, tore up the paper, and leaning forward, began betting on Uncle's cards.

CHAPTER XXII

The Third Birthday

THE Canadians delivered the final attack on Passchendaele in October. By that time the town in which Uncle and Skene were quartered had begun to be deserted. The civilians were leaving in a steady stream. The gas-shelling was every day more regular and the cellars were becoming sodden. Only in patches on the outskirts was any inhabited house to be found. Gradually, even these were abandoned and the whole place became a great empty sepulchre, where feet rang on the stones of grass-grown streets and voices echoed from the walls of houses where no one lived. Pathetic, those last dregs of civilian evacuation! An old, half-paralysed man pushed before him an invalid's chair in which sat an older and more helpless woman.

"Courage, Father," Skene said to him, taking his pass on the bridge.

"I have courage enough, thank you, sir. It is

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Mother who makes herself bad blood because she has had to leave behind all her things! This is all she can bring."

The old lady was nursing a pink vase, some knitting, and a portrait of the Pope.

Next came the poor prostitute—the girl who went with mechanics and gendarmes in peace time and with British Tommies during the War, too poor and too damaged to bribe the necessary authorities to get her papers to Boulogne or Amiens, or one of the better pitches of her trade, or even to get taken out in a British car to Bethune, Abbeville or Hazebrouck. She had often tried, and had, amongst others, come up against Skene. With the undying courage and humorous philosophy of her sort, she bore no grudge.

"So they'll let you go at last, Sylvie," said Skene, holding out her *carte* stamped and signed.

"Yes, old friend, they always said they wouldn't, but you see, in the end it is I who have won."

This was the extent of her malice, just a child's "So there!" She plodded off, on her cheap, thin, heel-twisted boots, her slack, much-corseted figure bent over by the wicker dress basket she was carrying, the unhealthy white of her skin showing

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through all artifice, turning her head left and right, even in that parade of misery, because it was her business. The last to go was the little white-haired, apple-cheeked Secretary of the Mairie. Skene had been associated with him in investigating a dozen cases of military looting or civilian stealing. Portfolio under arm, he was carrying away the matrix of the Cadastral map; tears were running down his face. He could only say, "Oh, mon bon Monsieur!"

So they went. It was not like the panicky evacuations in the early months of the War. For three years they had been supporting conditions that grew steadily worse, and now at last were impossible. They were leaving behind a whole history of sacrifice and endurance, going to the cold charity of people a little more fortunate than they, but already sick to death of the War, and very likely themselves being shelled or bombed.

They left an empty shell of a town filled with gas. Skene wandered about it a little in the bright autumn midday, but the place had already passed beyond the looting stage. Some of it was stripped by the owners, some surreptitiously by soldiers, some was securely locked up and some already half-destroyed by shell-fire. He gath-

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ered plums from outlying gardens, grapes from a hothouse where the last splinters of glass were falling.

To east and south was the thin ring of British trenches. Inside—nothing.

So another winter crept on, and people said to themselves, "A year ago I was doing such-a-thing with old So-and-So," or "two years ago," or "three years ago," and now "So-and-So is dead—let's see, was it 1915? How time goes!"

To Skene and Uncle all the difference was the shorter daylight, which should have meant less shelling but more bombing, instead of which everything seemed to grow more, and nothing less.

They had one great gain—a new Town Major. He was one of those young Scotchmen who appear thirty whether they are nineteen or thirty-nine, loose-limbed, long-striding, hard in build and fibre, great in width of loin, pale and often unkempt-looking, not from lack of blood or shaving, but from a great thickness of skin and wiry toughness of hair. A young gunner who quarrelled with this Captain Gilmour, "Gillie" as he was immediately called, about bridge, or stores, or passes for the men, or some such trifle, called

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him: "A wild Jock with heather growing out of his ears." He paid no heed. In his personality there was something completely unbeatable, comforting in those days when disappointment gradually deepened into apprehension. Mobilized on the outbreak of war, in one of the old Scottish Territorial units, he had brought to the business a ferocity and cunning scarcely to be hoped from an educated and well-mannered Chartered Accountant. Wounded early, he was sent, on recovery, to Gallipoli, and his stories of that epic, of personal valour and hand-to-hand combats, were entirely refreshing. He came to France in time to get his second wound on the Somme, and his third at Vimy, and was now allowed, by a thankful country, to take the comparatively "soft" job of Town Major.

He had arrived just as news of Cambrai had set ringing the bells of London. It had also set "reacting" all the German guns on the Front. For three days Uncle and Skene lost all their sleep, many of their meals, and five men. The shelling was indiscriminate, on account of the mists, but perfectly constant. On the third morning a hatless apparition, with a gas-mask strung round his neck, had halted a party of

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police, scavengers and storemen in the Garden Suburb.

“Good morning,” said the apparition with a nice manner and a Glasgow accent. “Can I use your telephone?”

Skene had conducted him to the “Signal Dug-out,” of which he and Uncle were very proud. He could not help hearing the beginning of the conversation on the telephone

“Army Head-quarters—Army Head-quarters—yes, Army—d’you think I said Hind-quarters?—Hallo, Army Ten—is that you, Major?—yes—well, I have! I’ve got ’em all here at A19 at the Clearance Officer’s—and now what the hell do you want me to do with ’em?”

Skene touched him on the shoulder. “Come over and have breakfast when you’ve done! My Quartermaster-Sergeant will billet your men!”

He came over. It was an hour before he was washed and shaved and breakfasted, and seated before a whisky, just as the Bosche shells began getting unpleasantly close on the road. His men were fed and housed on a derelict barge until accommodation could be found.

He never moved away, but formed part of their mess. His old job of billeting, etc., being com-

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pletely gone, the Army did not seem to know what to do with him, and let him be. It was a good job they did, for Skene's work had more than doubled, and Uncle took less and less interest in anything.

Normally the Town Major was responsible for all that went on in the town, irrespective of change of unit or situation; Skene was not supposed to go beyond his dumps and bridges and the direction of traffic towards its proper unit.

All this was obsolete. In the streets where workpeople had gossiped and children played, nothing was now heard but the clank of hurried men and animals anxious to get away from those toppling houses and high walls that held the gas, the crash of falling wall or roof and the curious squashy explosion of the gas shell, whose tone differed completely from the crack of the old shrapnel, or high explosive's short dry sound. Now both officers made a journey a day into that deserted rubbish heap to see what road was clear, what had "fallen in," or been "stunk out," in the last few hours.

The echoes of Cambrai and Caporetto died away; no one knew exactly how many divisions had gone to Italy. The winter became strangely

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silent, strangely empty. Instead of being merely an incident in a considerable civil and military population, the post where Gillie the Town Major lived with Uncle and Skene had become an isolated little camp, without a soul within call, between the trenches that girded the empty town on one side, and some two or three miles of well-shelled roads and farms on the other. First one and then another farm or cottage, where gunners or engineers, Balloon Section men, or medical units had succeeded each other for years, was shelled out and abandoned. Christmas passed; and then in that queer silence came the first rumours of the great Bosche offensive.

Uncle, Gillie and Skene had seen such a lot of offensives that, to them, it seemed unlikely this new one would go any farther than the others. Offensives at Ypres and Loos, at Verdun and the Somme and Champagne and Arras! They had all ended—where? In stalemate. No, it was not taken very seriously in their little mess.

Sometimes they entertained Infantry officers going to the line, or field gunners on their way to their unsavoury positions. The little mess had become well-known throughout the Corps, and divisions changing over, in rest areas within sight

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of the sea, would ask each other, "Are they still all right at Uncle's?"

From these visitors little or nothing could be learned. The Front was abnormally quiet. The trenches in most places had almost disappeared. "We hold shell-holes with camouflage net over us and precious little wire in front. Can't keep anything repaired—we hold 'em with patrols and live in the support line!" said the Infantry. Skene thought of his report on the state of the front line he had written in October, 1915. "Our battery positions are full of gas—every shell seems to contain some!" said the gunners. But both agreed about the enemy: "We can't find him—can't see him. He's miles back. We think he's got the wind up!" "Like our people at home!" they added.

February came, fairylike with its wonderful early weather, clear skies, and all the promise of spring. Aconites and anemones bloomed in Plug Street Wood, in the deserted battlefields of the Somme, in the parks of Vlamertinghe or Trois Tours.

March came in; and with it that great apotheosis of Prussianism—that greatest effort at

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window-dressing which advertisement has ever devised.

To Skene, of course, it was all danger and discomfort. After weeks of publicity, that great bombardment opened over most of the British front, deeper in reach and greater in volume than any yet, and behind it deployed the rested, heartened, full-fed German troops from the collapsed Russian front, while thousands of labour battalions and gangs of civilian or captive labour prepared their roads and emplacements, their railways and jumping-off positions.

The day came at last; and that great avalanche of guns and men was launched.

To Skene, who had been able to sleep little, and that only in the daytime, it was almost a relief to hear that the great blow had fallen. It brought to the front of him all that was most English.

By night, watching from the door of the dug-out the far-reaching barrage of enormous guns; by day, watching the stream of divisions going south, to hold the Bosche at Ham or Peronne, and then to stop him at all costs from entering Amiens, Skene's feelings toughened and hardened and he could only feel what his Corporal said, when he

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saw his brother brought home, with legs from the knee downwards a mass of bloody rags: "By God, I'll land them one for this!"

The night after he definitely knew that the Somme break-through had been frustrated, Skene woke a little after midnight, leapt out of bed, and shook himself.

No dream. Super-bombardment! Scrambling into gum-boots and British-warm, he got out of the dug-out and looked round.

The desolation of the Garden Suburb was lit by one continual conflagration from Ypres around the whole horizon, dwindling into the flats towards La Bassée. The ground shook and tiles were flying off the buildings, though the actual shells were falling some thousands of yards away, except for a steady, punctual crash every two minutes in the direction of the bridge. He found his Sergeant beside him, the men all standing-to, and nothing to be done but wait.

Diving back into their resting-place Skene woke Uncle. The old man came out, shivering with night air and whisky, and murmuring the headline of the Daily Paper of the previous week:

"All is quiet on the Western Front, but the situation is not without danger!"

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"Where's Gillie?" Skene shouted in his ear.

"Dunno. Suppose he's run away. Fool if he hasn't!"

"Who's that on the road there?"

"Go and see while I have a tin-hat and gas-mask parade for our lot!"

Skene found two people in British-warms who said they were Canadian Demolition Engineers, looking for Captain Dakers.

"We've got to blow up his bridges, the Bosche are 'through'!"

"Is that what all the noise is about? Captain Dakers is busy: I'll come along to the bridge with you, to see that our sentry don't shoot you."

The astmosphere was chokier by the bridge, and Skene loosened his mask. His eyes watered from the whiffs of gas and the bridge seemed all out of shape. Then he saw that the brick pillar on the near side of the step-off was gone, with the sentry's shelter, all down into the dark, flash-reflecting water.

He bawled in the Canadian's ear: "They've done our men in; here's your bridge; come and have a drink at the dug-out, by where you met me, when you can!"

He left them, stepping quickly aside. An old

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familiar rushing filled the air. A big 'un had just missed the bridge, and plunging into the river sent water and débris over everything. By the time he had wiped his face and head, he found a tractor on the top of him, lugging a six-inch howitzer. Behind came Gillie and an orderly confirming the news "The Bosche are through!" "Better get everything north of the river," they agreed, and went back to Uncle, who had packed his own valise, and was giving directions to get out the barge. "No go," commented Gillie, "they're through that side too!"

"Very well. The moral of the troops is excellent!" quoted Uncle. "Wheels and animals over the bridge, we'll ferry the personal estate!" He pointed to Skene's valise that Jerry had just dumped, properly strapped, by the door.

"Thank God, the dumps are nearly empty!"

"What have you got?"

"Shovels and pick-handles and sandbags and camouflage, all trench stuff."

"Put a match to it, take a tin of petrol. I'm just going to see what Corps is up to. I'll be back in an hour!" No one doubted Uncle for an instant. "Where shall we meet?" asked Gillie.

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"The old brigade bombing ground, at White Farm!"

After setting light to all that was inflammable, Skene got to the bridge in time to join in the cheers for the ambulances going through to try and reach the wounded from the battalion dressing station. Walking wounded, guns, and stragglers were coming the other way; Gillie was turning the latter back with a shovel.

Skene gazed. A New Army man, he had never seen anything like it. Regulars of Mons, and early Canadians of the second battle of Ypres, had seen it before; but not Skene; not the New Armies. Presently, whole units began coming over, Brigade Signals with their instruments, trench mortars, a whole platoon of Infantry, then the ambulances, all but one having failed.

The shelling was replaced by machine-gun fire, nearer and always nearer.

About half a mile to the north of the bridge was the old "White Farm," where, after Skene had come to the sector, old Josef Deporter had gone on planting beet and pulling flax in fields ever more and more pitted with shell-holes and the curious flat saucer-like mark of the shrapnel bomb. The brigade then holding the line coveted

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his home pasture for a Bombing School. There, authorized by an enthusiastic Staff, some R.E.'s had constructed trenches and a model pill-box, to show young soldiers the use of the smoke bomb. Old Deporter had gone to Skene, who offered compensation, then to the French Mission, who referred him back to Skene, finally to his Deputy in the Chamber. That worthy, hoping to be in the next Government, had made a violent attack on the present Government, whose parrying enquiries, percolating from Whitehall through Montreuil to Skene's corps, had caused the abandonment of the Bombing School just as the Bosche long-range fire made farm and pasture alike untenable.

Just as the grey morning pierced the drizzle (the weather had broken the very hour it ceased to be of use to the Bosche) Skene found Uncle getting out of the Ford car at the bombing ground, and Gillie placing the men and siting the Lewis guns. "Beaten old Deporter, anyhow!" said Skene, and Uncle grunted.

"I've been up to Corps. They're gone!"

Skene whistled. Corps gone! It was like saying that King's Cross Station had run away.

"That means railhead and I dunno what!"

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"Look!" Gillie pointed back over their right shoulders. The glare of burning dumps was dying in the lighter sky and becoming clouds of dim smoke. The inevitable Jerry, who had carried a "Queen" stove on his back, now produced tins of hot tea. It was nectar. The humour of it touched Skene.

"This isn't the first time *you've* run away, is it, Jerry?"

"No, sir," and then, in the same matter-of-fact voice: "Did you wish to sleep in the pill-box, or in the Farm?" And looking at the skeleton timbers and gaping walls of Deporter's farm, they all laughed.

Uncle stopped first: "Your friend Colonel Castle is at the Station, at least I think it's Castle, but he's got a tin hat. He's making things shift with Italian labourers, and Zulus, and some railway people. Railhead's like a fortress. He told me to stick on as long as we could. He says the French are coming and he's tired of being shelled." It was a sentiment that found a general echo. Exasperated by mechanical routine, carried on under long-range fire, neither Skene nor anyone else felt much discomfort or panic. Let the Bosche come, man to man, and see.

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He was coming.

One of the men Gillie had left under a Corporal at "hedgerow" some hundreds of yards nearer the bridge, which they commanded with a Lewis gun, put his head round the corner of the trench.

"They're going to blow up the bridge, sir!" A roar and rain of fragments echoed him. Gillie, standing on the parapet, swore under his breath.

"Bossed it! the girders are still standing! Look here, I'm going to watch with that Lewis gun!"

In a few minutes the gibber of the Lewis was heard. Two men crawled up the ditch, with a stretcher, carrying a third. The Corporal had a message. "Mr. Gilmour sent this Canadian, who's wounded, sir; the other's killed trying to reset his charge, and 'ave you any ammunition?"

They put the collapsed Demolitions officer away in the box car, and sent three boxes of S.S.A. by hand down to Gillie. They were not short of it, thanks to the dumps about. Let the Bosche cross the bridge on the girders if he could!

Uncle had set everyone to work, roofing in here, digging out there, dividing the time into watches, until the dummy trenches, the model pill-box, and the ruins of the farm were "not too bad to die

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in!" as he put it, wiping his eyes that the gas had made to water.

The day wore on, with gas-shelling. Gillie and his gun seemed to be keeping the bridge, and the Bosche, not as yet too sure of what he was up against, had still to gather himself for his second stroke. An aeroplane, dipping like a swallow, was machine-gunning the opposite bank of the river.

Once Skene turned to Uncle:

"What do you reckon we've lost?"

"Ten miles of line and most of the Infantry of two divisions."

"Bad as that?"

"Well, there was a brigade in the town and one each side. What have we seen come back?"

"The worst isn't opposite us!"

The April dusk drew down in grey showers; Skene walked up the road and found an N.C.O. and some men standing in front of Deporter's gate under the notice "Private! Entry Forbidden!" They were the billeting party of a labour battalion, sent forward by some order never countermanded, and then hurriedly armed and told to do their best. Presently an officer and nearly two

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hundred men turned up, mostly greyheaded. They confirmed Skene's worst fears. His men and they were the only troops between the advancing Bosche and the half-fortified railhead.

The night that followed was the queerest Skene had ever spent. On all sides, rumours, a sense of thousands in motion; darkness and silence where was usually lights and traffic; lights and the rumble of machine-gunning or shelling, where darkness and silence should be. During his turn of duty, he walked round and round their little fortress with Jerry. Gillie had gone to the next farm, where the labour battalion were digging in, back across the road to Deporter's and the pill-box where the spare Lewis was. There came to him bursts of English song:

"I want to go home,
No more I want to roam,
Oh my, I don't want to die,
I want to go home!"

from cheery souls eating and drinking round smothering braziers; then the certainty that the firing was dead behind him.

Uncle took his turn, but awoke Skene at dawn.
"Who's that on the road?"

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Skene took Jerry and crept along the hedge, a "Mills" in each hand, shaking the sleep out of him and trying to subdue his breathing. The approaching figures were a great Australian and a small bandy-legged Jock, smoking and snuffing the air. As Skene came out on the road, the Scot gave him "Good morning, sir!" and the Aussi: "Hallo, digger, seen any Fritzes?"

"I thought I heard him your way!"

"There were some, but we settled 'em. Show the gentleman your watch, Jock!"

The little Scot produced a beautiful chronometer from his shirt: "We'd sell it for a drink. 'Tis an officer's."

"Are there any more of you?"

"Bags of us coming, and the French. Well, we'll be getting on. We'd like some more watches!"

Skene looked down the road and saw another couple, Jock and Aussi. Back at Uncle's trench he found Gillie shaking hands.

"Good-bye, old lads. This is good enough for me, I'm going on with this crowd!"

So passed Gillie from their ken, with that motley band, chasing Ludendorff's deadly "tactics of permeation."

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The next visitors were French Cavalry, on foot, with musketons and machine-guns.

"Two nights one day we came from Soissons!" the officer told Skene. "We kill all our 'orses!"

Uncle and Skene and the Labour officer gathered their men and marched them to railhead. At the railhead were orders from Corps. They could "pull out."

They did. From railhead, a whole countryside plus an army was retreating.

In the fine spring rain, they trudged up the pavé, between heavy guns, farm carts, cows and ambulances, going the same way, and an opposite stream of English lorries, full of sardonic French gunners, with their seventy-fives rattling behind. Skene was busy counting his men, looking out for the lame, scrounging a lift for this one or that, seeing that a collapsed civilian cart was cleared out of the road, helping to unload a ditched lorry. Now that he was again out of the actual touch with the Bosche, his forebodings returned upon him and he worked with a heavy heart.

Not so the private soldier. With little or no grasp of the realities of the business, content to be in motion, going somewhere to do something, he inevitably sang. A limping, slouching crowd,

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nearly all freshly wounded, or lame with old wounds, marching or carried in vehicles, bearing, or surrounded by God knows what collection of impedimenta, and all singing:

“Mademoiselle of Armentières

She hasn't been worried for forty years.”

While the women and the old men who led the cows and drove the carts joined in the chorus: “Vinky, Blinky, parley-vous!”

Apocalyptic, biblical, the crowd moved on. Behind it, a pillar of smoke by day, of flame by night, rose from the burning dumps.

CHAPTER XXIII

Colonel Werner's Revelations

ALL very well for Corps to say "Pull out," meaning "Come out of the zone taken up by the French, where we lost half our Infantry and a third of our guns, and come back here, where we are, and recognize!" All very well. Corps had twenty-four hours' start. Skene and Uncle brought along their details—all unfit men—at the best pace they could.

Passing beyond railhead they met increasing streams of French men and guns, taking up the new line. They found some deserted horse-lines for billets, but were roused by shelling all round them, and tumbled out in the dark, to find the French coming back. The thin film of a labour battalion here, a Scotch machine-gun company there, and an Australian tunnelling company anywhere, had not sufficed to stem the Bosche, who had now moved up his guns and was coming on again. Mixed up with the débris of the Corps

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and the civilian refugees of fourteen communes, it took them three days' marching to get clear.

In the very long run, of course the Bosche was stopped. Uncle had always known the reason, since that April day in 1915 when the handful of the original Canadians had outlived even the surprise of gas. The reason was simple: give him the finest chances in the world, the individual Bosche could not or would not fight. April petered out in shelling and reorganization. May came, but British and French were now reorganized and gaps closed. The Bosche tried other sectors in the French line—got a little way and stuck.

The corps to which Skene belonged took up a part of the new line, that ran through the old railhead. It seemed a queer topsy-turvy world to Skene, working his advanced area where the aerodrome and the rest billets used to be. Uncle had found a billet in the Estaminet de la Couronne, in the village of Bertezeele, on the edge of the Flemish-speaking plateau. Here they pursued their old habits as far as possible, taught the French units to play football, and in return learned a good deal about field cookery such as the British Army had never dreamed off.

SIXTY-FOUR, NINETY-FOUR!

One of those American divisions incredible to Ludendorff, and incredibly cheering to the tired French and English troops to whose support they came, appeared in the corps area, in size and spirit a complete surprise to minds stunned by nearly four years of continuous battle. Nearly fifty per cent. stronger in numbers than either the French or English divisions, and composed exclusively of young men between twenty and thirty, selected for physical fitness from millions mobilized, they overflowed the old camping grounds, horse-lines, depots, manœuvre areas and battlefields. Their officers, well-read, short-haired, spectacled young men of earnest and enquiring minds, less hampered than the English by regular army associations, and without the conscriptive tradition of the French, let loose a torrent of enquiry, experiment, and endeavour. The few experienced officers spared to them by the older armies for instruction and guidance were soon swept completely off their feet, and Skene, like many another of those semi-fit, odd-job-detachment officers, was impressed to give such instruction as might be possible in the few days before the new division went up into the Line.

He was accosted one morning by a tall, spare

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officer with tanned cheeks and grizzled hair—a Colonel Werner, U. S. Infantry, attached for instruction.

To have a Colonel attached to him, arriving before the order under which he moved, without servant or groom, off-saddling himself and putting up his own horse, did not surprise Skene at all—he had been too long in France. Moreover, he was genuinely thankful to see the Americans and curious to make their acquaintance.

Colonel Werner neither spat, nor touched strong drink, nor began his sentences with the "See here, Stranger," of the comic papers. He resembled nearly in face, voice, and manner that miniature of Skene's maternal great-grandfather, Quaker, banker, brewer, and Mayor of Overwater during the Peninsular War, touched, say, by the influence of ten years' residence in the larger colonies.

The tight, stock-like collar of the American tunic, the clean-shaven lips and chin, faint suggestion of whisker, old-maidish precision in thought and speech, scrupulous care taken of a pair of long, fine hands unblistered by manual labour—such exterior details contributed to the illusion. But there was more than this—a clean

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freshness of the mind, great patience, respect for material means and for decisive action.

They soon became fast friends.

At this period of the War stale weariness had brought almost complete uniformity to the Sunday afternoon procedure of units not actually in the front line. Skene did nothing on Sunday morning that was not strictly necessary, lunched rather better than usual, then sat in a wicker chair that a thoughtful orderly had plundered from surrounding desolation, and took his ease, till the "stand-to" at dusk and the increasing traffic again brought duties that could not be neglected.

Colonel Werner was an agreeable addition to these occasions. Seated in a corner of that Flemish meadow over which guns from Essen and Skoda were raging and ramping against guns from the Tyne or St. Etienne, smoking an endless succession of long butt-ended cigars—his only indulgence, his one claim to be the real American of cinema and comic story—he would talk of his country, township, estate, home, wife and children, business and place of worship. In the long weeks of summer-lit suspense before Mangin's flank attack of July ushered in the final phase, he

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brought before Skene's imagination an ample wooden house in rolling wooded hills, where big, healthy, plain-minded people did, more than any other human beings perhaps since the world began, just what seemed good to them.

Once the Colonel was talking to the natives, their endurance, their passionate love of the soil—above all of the heroism of the women.

"There's a farm," he said, "in J34. I went there while I was attached to that —— Corps" (he pointed northward, beyond the French), "to see about the burial of fourteen of our men, killed by a long-range shot right in the yard—I expect you know the place—an ancient building—our Quartermaster, who's a professor of history, says it was built by Dagos."

For half a minute Skene tried to persuade himself that he did not know, but the blood rushing to his temples gave him the lie—he held tight to the left arm of his chair and pulled at his pipe. The American went on:

"There's a girl there that has a history, I should say, but you can hardly ask her what it is, and it beats imagining. She lives there—it's so near the Line—she billets in her own home, so to speak—

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and borrows artillery horses, to pull her old buggy to market. Yes, I assure you, she drives from her home in a gun emplacement, in a buggy that Noah must have driven out of the Ark."

Skene puffed his pipe; he could see every crease in the varnished leather cover of the so-called "buggy."

"She wanted our fellows buried in the small patch next the road, and not in her home paddock where the Quartermaster had begun to dig. She wasn't getting on too well with our 'Quarters' on account of having said that there were graves enough in France without having to walk over them every time she went to milk the cows. Quarters didn't take it very kindly, and neither did I, at first, until I had been talking to her for some minutes, and then her face kind of got me. I knew her trouble, through the difficulty we had in finding out how to make up the billeting return. It seems they were well-to-do until the Bosche broke through. She had lost her father, too, under unusual circumstances. It seems she had a married sister down Laventie way, carrying on a farm, as they all do, the man being mobilized, and the children going to school in gas-masks. Then the Bosche came round each side—you know."

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Skene did know. He could see the stream of wounded and stragglers getting over the bridge between the shells.

“When the news got up here—news travels among these people as if they were Indians—the old man apparently thought he must go and see to the married daughter. Partly affection, partly they’d got—I don’t know how much land under potatoes—potatoes for manufacture, not to eat. Anyhow, the girl says, he harnessed the old hoss with his three-cornered tumbril—you know, the sort with an iron rudder on the front wheel, and off he went, plumb into the battle! Can you imagine it!”

Skene nodded. Perfectly plain to him! The old, big-limbed, bent figure, going snail’s pace beside the old horse in the tumbril, down roads at first empty, then full of refugees and wounded, then empty again, past burning farms and dumps, over shelled crossings of road, river or railway—down into the rattle of machine-gun fire and the stench of gas.

“So she lost her father!” Colonel Werner went on. “Think she was beat? Not she! The farm was too far forward for much work to be done. A line of reserve trenches was dug through

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it, and marked the zone from which civilians were evacuated. The labourers were all gone, and the place in such a state one would have thought she couldn't live there. But could she be kept away? Not for a day! Every morning at 'stand-to' we heard her out and about, issuing orders to the men—telling them 'Don't!' like a pack of children. We arrested her twice, but what could you do? The French Mission wouldn't prosecute, the civil power had moved to Evreux in Normandy, the A.P.M. said it wasn't his jurisdiction. Every evening, she shut the place up, like a shop. We got accustomed to her, the men used to do odd jobs for her—they got to washing down the buggy—repairing the shrapnel holes it got, harnessing up for her on market days. She spoke good English and ruled that billet with a rod of iron. No outstanding claims for damage there! Then she got to cooking for the men. They got to saluting her. In my country we have one tradition of which we are proud!" ("Only one!" thought Skene, who, though he admired the Colonel's manners, had noticed how right America always was.) "It's that of the civil war. That girl reminded me of tales my father used to tell of some of our women, in the old days. She might almost have

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passed for an American girl, I tell you. However pale and tired she grew, however the weather or the shelling might be, there she was, well-dressed and quiet, and mistress of the situation! Not from any high principle, but simply, as she said, because she had lost enough, and couldn't afford to lose any more. Yes, sir, the women are fine, I reckon!"

CHAPTER XXIV

Victory

IN the middle of July the Bosche made what history now knows to be his last effort—the drive at Soissons. The French who lay next Skene's crops were summoned south. Uncle and Skene paid little attention. Besides being now permanently sceptic regarding all offensives, they knew that, submarines or no, the Americans were in France, some hundreds of thousands of them. English statesmen talked of "fighting on three, or five years if necessary!" Such sentiments, uttered in London, passed over the heads of those who had lived for years east of Amiens and St. Omer. Besides, for a long while everyone had been hearing rumours that Foch, now Commander-in-Chief, had many divisions in reserve. In their journeys backwards and forwards, Skene and Uncle both found that as a fact there were, not only American, but English and French divisions, far back, being "saved up" for something, and their stoicism

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took again the rosy tinge that seldom deserted it for long.

To arrange for billeting the English troops that came to relieve the French, Skene had to go as far as St. Firmin to see a French Head-quarters about detail. He found the dry, hard old French regulars, in their little temporary office, unusually elated, moving little flags on a big-scale war map, and *Moving Them Forward*. He was shown a communiqué. It told of what is now called Mangin's flank attack.

"Better news this morning?"

"I believe you, the news is better—and it is about time."

"What does it mean?" asked Skene—"the turn of our luck?"

"It shows we have still some strength!" was all the dry answer. "Now, about these special units of the British Army for which you require space in our area . . ."

Presently, his business done, Skene went across to the Coq d'Or Restaurant. The place was full of Frenchmen, dismounted cavalymen turned into machine-gunners, but still the aristocrats of their army, with money in their pockets, doing themselves well, ransacking that little market-

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town inn, used to quiet English subalterns who would take what was put before them, not having sufficient command of the language to ask for anything better. Skene saw the red piping on their service-blue uniform, and remembered that they must be Cuirassiers, and that he had once asked news of one of that lot.

By this time the best wine of local hostelryes was labelled "Pontet Canet"; in earlier days it had been "La Rose." Skene ordered some, and invited the co-operation of a nice young Frenchman. If a celebration was forward, why not an allied celebration? The nearest young Frenchman was not unwilling. Like Skene, he had been too long in the War to refuse a possible drink.

Skene ordered a second bottle, and as the crimson liquid shrank behind the label asked casually:

"You didn't have a D'Archeville in your lot?"

"I believe you, we had D'Archeville. He was, like myself, a Cuirassier, and went to the Flying Corps. He was a type!"

Skene knew that this meant, not that D'Archeville was typical, but that he was "some lad."

"Was? He's gone, then?"

"Died in Champagne in 1917—as I should

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have been, if I hadn't had a leg all in marmalade."

"That's a pity; I had good wishes to give him, from an acquaintance."

"You must give them now at the cemetery, at Avenant-le-Petit. He was a type, I tell you, Georges—cared for nothing but sport—I knew him well. . . . I had made sport with him, on his father's land, up in the north there, where one is nearly in Belgium. . . . The War breaks out. . . . A changed Georges . . . everything in life left behind him. Nothing for Georges but Glory, Patriotism, and the regulation tobacco allowance!" Skene filled up the young man's glass and nodded.

"Well! He was not a philosopher, as I am. One can't smoke glory in one's pipe. Georges is full of devotion, repents his past life, and carries on. But he forgot one thing. Among his *amies* was the daughter of the gamekeeper of his sport in those parts—an old Fleming living in a farm of his fathers. They have that system there. Giving up the various things Georges gave up, meant giving up that woman. Ah! but one is never finished with women!"

Before Skene's eyes there seemed to rise the

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dirty little railway station of his first railhead, and a figure with face turned towards the *décrets* and *arrêtés* that papered the walls—and a voice begging him to telephone to an English hospital, about a Frenchman.

“There was Verdun. You know where we were, in shell-holes out of whose sides ran little dribbles of blood.

“Both Georges and I were invalided, I with my leg, he with his lungs. I did not see him again until the following February. He and I were down at the great camp at Mailly, beginning the rehearsals of that *sacré* offensive of May, 1917. We both took influenza, and they sent us to the hospital that used to be at the Hôtel Vitzman, Avenue Kruger, Paris!

“That woman found Georges. I used to see her when I visited him during his convalescence. She was not like the girl one used to see at Vanderlynden’s farm, when one went shooting. She was still not quite Parisienne, but well-arranged. She had lived and learned. He took an apartment for her. But then he went back, of course. He was wounded at Chemin des Dames, and took consumption. He died. Poor Georges! He

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was a type!" The young man rose to go, with an elaborate English "So long, chum!"

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So he had found Madeleine's "fiancé" at last, with the fatal appropriateness of war time.

Jolting home in the box car Skene felt as if every word of the young Frenchman had stroked the hardened scars of an old wound.

Once back at his post, however, he had little time for reflection—at last the old Bosche line, which Skene had first seen three years before, gave way before the attacks of English, French, Belgians and Americans. From below Lille up to Nieuport on the sea, it suddenly melted away. The frontier that had split the world in half just ceased to be, one fine morning.

Uncle was amazed. A real victory, won in battle! He gave it up. But to Skene there came an afterglow from his early enthusiasm. Of all those laughing boys who, in the great training camps of the New Army in 1915, had sung with such zest "The only step the Kaiser's got to learn is the quick-step back to Germany," how few, how very few, were seeing the fruit of all those

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years of effort and unceasing bloodshed! And he was one.

His job had almost ceased. The battle suddenly lengthened out into a pursuit in which English patrols had all they could do to find the retreating enemy. Corps itself was preparing to move. Skene and other minor details received their orders. On a bright October morning, he stopped the Ford in which he and Uncle were travelling, within sight of the morass in which young Murdon had been killed.

"There," he pointed to Uncle, "that's where I was, three years ago, this blessed day."

The Line had shifted at most a few yards since Skene's time. But the whole place had a look of decay. The continuous trenches, gradually abandoned, had fallen in or been blown flat. The last traces of trees had disappeared. Old landmarks, such as the remains of a cottage, or a length of paved road, had been dispersed. The coarse foliage—dock and ground-ivy and grass mixed with wild corn—stank of gas, and concealed grenades and pieces of shell. At every turn Skene noted with envy the concrete pill-boxes that would have saved so many lives, and the light, concealed, trench tramway that would have

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spared so many weary hours of fasting vigil. Standing just inside the old Bosche line, he could see how exposed was the angle of the British communication trench from his old dump to his old Head-quarters dug-out—"How many times," he thought, "have I come round that corner! They must have seen my head and had a pot at it. I remembered the splintered 'A' frames of the revetment; we couldn't think where they were enfilading from!" He had a sensation of not being really there—of being dead with Murdon and Corporal Ames and the rest, of having returned from death to visit the place.

Uncle was poring over his 5A map of Belgium.

"Wasn't there a conservatory at the corner of the wood and a bit of kitchen garden?"

"Gone before my time—practically front line!"

"Well, that's where *we* were—first Canadian division, July, 1915. Our horses used to go in the stables—here—and the château and the heavy gunners' mess was in the cellar!" Another war that Skene had never known, the war of the first few months—regular divisions with Colonials and Territorials attached, before trenches and the New Army. "But the stables," Uncle went on, "were stone and very solid!"

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They walked on. Nothing but spongy mud, coarse grass, scrap iron, stench!

Was this what they had fought for, this dragged scrap-heap; bereft now even of the comradeship that had once made it bearable—robbed now even of its importance as the frontier where Justice and Fairplay stood at issue with Oppression and Greed? This was what he had won through to—these dregs!

Uncle wiped his mouth and fastened the stopper of the flask.

“You ain’t going t’ buy the site, are y’, Skene?”

Skene got back into the box car and dropped into a discussion as to whether there was not, in fact, money in the idea of buying and reclaiming the front line in Flanders.

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The Umpteenth Corps did not share the Allied entry into Lille. Instead they had an entry of their own into a Flemish manufacturing town, with a core of old market-place, cathedral and town hall, and an old bridge with dropsical flanking towers, surrounded by a rind of new red-brick suburbs. For a moment the old enthusiasm flared up. Flemish mechanics and shop-keepers and

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womenfolk, who had heard but never seen the English soldiers fighting for them all these four years, suddenly saw in their own streets khaki and tin helmets, and a young officer of the Intelligence collecting municipal officials. Sober twentieth-century people, from offices and shops, wearing the shawls of mill-hands, the bowlers and black coats of a laborious life, danced, shouted, wept and wrung the hands of officers and men. Ladies with every appearance of invincible propriety kissed perspiring R.E.s putting up the bridges the Bosche had destroyed, and dragged out materials for their work from unsuspected hiding-places.

Skene, borrowed by Intelligence to help straighten things out, sat in the magnificent "Salle des Chevaliers" of the Town Hall, interrogating and docking batches of Bosche prisoners. When he came out he was set on by troops of children who clung all over him, demanding to be kissed, and would soon have left him buttonless in their thirst for souvenirs. Struggling to his billet in the front room of a miner's cottage, he sat with Uncle over a bottle of whisky, waiting for news of the Armistice terms that had been sent to the Bosche. It was the evening of November the tenth.

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The field telephone stood on the treadle sewing machine in the window. Corps Signals had been duly bribed.

The man of the house came in from work, and passed by them, with doffed cap, to the back kitchen where his family were collected round the stove.

"Have ye explained to him about the billeting?" said Uncle, doctrinaire in his cups.

Skene called the man back. The Frenchman protested. It was payment enough to have English in the house: but his wife struck in. It was too good, no doubt, but acceptable. "Give 'im a drink!" said Uncle.

Man, wife, old aunt, and little daughter Simone all came, and from liqueur glasses drank "to our deliverers" with tears and smiles, partly joy, partly unaccustomed whisky.

In the pitiful bare respectability of the little room, a cheap clock ticked, Uncle snored; Skene sat with his hand on the field telephone.

Before his tired eyes came faces from the great training camps, peopled by happy boys, now dust and decay in any corner from Dunkirk to Baghdad—visions of fine light-hearted mornings, or wet benumbing twilight in Bailleu and Villers

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Brettonneux, of which no stone now rested on another—visions of the waste of No-man's Land, in the dreary machine-gun-punctuated dawn, of Christmas dinners in the Officers' Restaurant at Amiens, where a hundred and fifty officers from all corners of the world with hands crossed sang "Auld Lang Syne"—visions of all that great cataclysm which had turned the ease-loving, sport-following manhood of England into the New Armies—turned the New Armies into Armed and Fighting England stretching through France and Italy, half across Asia and the oceans of the world—the cataclysm which had caught him, Skene, like a straw, whirled him out of the quiet certainty of his office life in the Close of an English cathedral town—bumped him against this and that until he had become a person unrecognizable to himself, with all the landmarks of his existence changed; caught him too against Madeleine and wrenched the heart out of him.

The telephone bell buzzed. He took up the receiver.

"Umpteenth Corps Clearance Officer!"

"Speaking! Who are you?"

"Corps Signals. Is that Mr. Skene?"

"Speaking!"

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"We've just intercepted Bosche wireless, sir. They are going to sign in the morning!"

"Thanks! Good night!"

Reaching over the little table, he shook Uncle. The old man opened his eyes, owl-like, and sat up.

"They're going to sign!"

"Who?—what?—oh! the Bosche!"

The old man looked at Skene and then away.

"Well, that's the end of it then!" he said.

"That's the end of it!" repeated Skene.

And suddenly he could not look at Uncle. He could only struggle with an emotion not admissible in an officer. The end of it! This little mean room, in a Flemish slum! The laconic printed "Order" that would appear on the morrow. Victory!

Rounds! He went outside into the chill and darkness of that November night. At the small factory where his men were billeted, he found his sentry; in the little pay-office, his superior New Army Corporal, reading a paper-covered novel over a brazier;—beyond, in the low sheds where his men were sleeping, his mules tied up and his carts stacked, all was in darkness and silence. "Celebrations!" he thought. Emerging again

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into the little paved street, he met what to him was typical of war as he had waged it. In the lampless glimmer of the night, a string of square boxes on wheels, known as limbers, was being drawn with a springless rattle over the pavé, by weary mules, beside whom were men just sufficiently awake to guide them. At the head a muffled figure, for all the world like the leader of some North Pole Expedition, was plodding beside a somnambulist horse.

Abreast of Skene he muttered:

"This'll get me to Werlies, I s'pose! Is it true they've chucked it?"

Skene nodded. "I believe the Bosche are going to sign the Armistice terms in the morning!"

"Good job. We should have chucked it, if they hadn't!"

And he stumped on.

Skene pulled off his boots and got into his blankets. "Too long," he thought. "Who cares now?"

He had forgotten that this was Victory.

CHAPTER XXV

Glory

THEN over Skene, as over many of his kind, within a week or two of the armistice, a great black cloud seemed to shut down. Try as he would, he could not shake it off. It had gradually dawned on him, that he had come to regard war as the normal condition of things, that it had become a habit.

His extraordinary luck, that had never allowed him to sink below a certain level, stuck to him to the very end; though he knew, no more than any of us, what luck is! Is it a perfectly equable shifting of pieces on a chessboard by a player with superhuman knowledge of each piece and a definite ordered plan? Does the player know and care, or does he merely upset the board in a drunken sleep—or can the pieces, by a sort of latent facility of their own, take some part in the game? Anyway his luck held. Skene's Corps was not one of those that moved up to the Rhine;

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certain units and individuals went, but the bulk remained, a skeleton of its former self, just where it had left off fighting, among mining villages on the edge of a wooded plain. The people, though hard up for all the small comforts of life and daunted by years of a foreign occupation, tried to be hospitable.

When the demobilization scheme was made public, his one thought was to get out of it, away from it all, at once—from this War into which he had thrown himself with such enthusiasm, which had used him, to the point almost of extinction, and which now suddenly had ceased—and left him high and dry. Lying in a too-short bed in the ground-floor bedroom of a workman's cottage, he read Murray's version of the *Hippolytus*. Ah! but some who loved the gods didn't die young, and—wished they had! That was his mood, waiting for demobilization.

Uncle, of course, had no difficulty in placing himself in half a dozen different categories for instant demobilization. Skene filled up the same papers. Why not? Thomas's death had removed the last person who was more than a mere mess acquaintance. Jerry, his servant, with an old soldier's instinct, had gone sick and got him-

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self demobbed. Burnside had taken a Commission, as Education Officer, to the Corps.

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A train more incredibly slow-moving even than the average military train, passed across battle-fields already green round their evil-smelling pools.

It was a grey damp winter, whose frosts had begun early; and anything more desolate than that wilderness of coarse weed slowly obliterating shell-hole and trench, was inconceivable. Nothing moved over those hummocks of tortured soil that had swarmed with agony and effort, but the rat and the crow. Rounding the corner of a skeleton wood, Skene looked out of the window on a place he knew too well.

In the first battle of the early days a Midland Yeomanry regiment, flung desperately into the fight, had held the advancing Bosche, at the price of two-thirds of its men. "Market Harbro" they had called it, and the name had stuck. It was still just recognizable. And to-day, it was alive. A Chinese labour company had been sent to remove explosives from the spot. The curious Celestials, moving inimitably about what had

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been an outpost of England—one of those stubbornly held mounds that had prevented London perhaps from having a German governor like Brussels—amused Skene. It reminded him of a Bible illustration by Doré, where the less-exemplary characters were working out destiny in terms of manual labour. In the midst of those flat-faced, shuffling, guttural Celestials, stood a figure different as West from East.

There was something familiar in the prominent nose and jaw, the square shoulders, humped in the British warm, the sturdy, almost bandy legs in good breeches and boots, the hands thrust out of sight, the bridle of the horse trailing from one arm. Earnshaw, by George!

The train was in a doze characteristic of military trains after the Armistice. The driver and one of those R.E. corporals who used to spring out of the soil, like a natural growth, were smoking and chatting together over the alleged subsidence of a piece of the line.

There seemed no hurry; Skene dropped from the carriage. It astonished him to find what affection he had for that bullet-headed, square-shouldered body. Earnshaw was not effusive, but he kept smiling and his eyes were very blue.

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"Come over to my dug-out, and have a drink!"

He called a "Chink" to hold his horse, but as they moved off over the morass Uncle could be heard shouting from the train: "She's off!"

"It's no odds," muttered Earnshaw, "she's through every day—come and stay the night and bring your friend!"

So they turned and both began to shout across that waste: "Get down and come and have a drink!"

Heads popped out, English, Scotch, Welsh, Colonial, French heads, amused, interested, uncomprehending. A private who had been giving a ventriloquial entertainment, held up his improvised dummy at the carriage window and made it say, "Go to hell! Give my love to Kitchener, when you get there, and ask when the three years will be up!"

The train was on the move. With a final shout: "See you in Dunkirk!" Skene turned away with Earnshaw.

Near by they lighted on one of those quiet polyglot men who used to officer the Chinese Labour Contingents in France—a Missionary by calling. The kindly spectacled face in that forlorn place seemed to Skene one of the most cheer-

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ful yet lost things he had ever seen. Farther on were German prisoners at work and the transport section which was Earnshaw's special care.

Standing on the shell-pocked ridge, covered with French grenades and German long-barbed wire, above the neat huts where Earnshaw's formation was encamped, Skene stopped and pointed.

"There—hospital farm—where that machine-gun emplacement is—there the Ypres road—and you're in the white château!"

Earnshaw nodded. Three years the War had surged backwards and forwards within a few thousand yards of the road from Ypres to Béthune, which had lined the original front of the B.E.F. in October, 1914. Nearly every officer in the earlier divisions had at one time or another been billeted in that white château which, because it was owned by an Austrian, some said, was never shelled. Its very boundaries were gone, as a footmark fades on wet sand. Skene and Earnshaw went into the big mess hut. This was the Head-quarters of a formation composed more of Chinese and Bosches than of English. At lunch and dinner, a field-grey Fritz stood statue-like behind his chair and doubled to execute

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an order. In Skene's bunk were electric light and an electric bell—on the floor, walls, windows, and from one door to another were wonderful mats, woven of twigs, of wire, of anything, by squatting "Chinks."

In the dusk that drew down after tea, they played badminton, and after dinner, sat, pipe in mouth, drink at elbow, not referring to their common past, while officers from the ends of the earth, and officers who had spent the whole War at training camps in England, officers from Straits Settlements, or Glasgow, put records on the gramophone, played bridge, and told yarns, Skene realized how much of the War he had missed, Italy, Salonika, Dardanelles, Palestine, "Mesopot," China, Samoa, the naval shows.

It was Earnshaw who said:

"What about that girl at the farm!"

Skene swallowed with an effort.

"What about her?"

"We've got to ride to the station—we could call there on the way!"

"My dear fellow!" began Skene.

"May as well. We've got to pass the door."

Skene put the matter out of his mind. A thin bent officer, lecturer at some Colonial University,

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was describing the experiences of Plummer's army sent to Italy to help the Italians in the dark hour of Caporetto. He described the arrival of the English and Scotch regiments among the Italian villages full of old men in cloaks and leg-wrappings, like Shakespearian or biblical characters, full of magnificent women, and sprawling statuesque children—and how they were still jumbled up with cockney or north-country Tommies, khaki-clad, hatchet-faced, jocular—he described the Italian dignity and shiftlessness and dramatic bombast, cheek-by-jowl with that indomitable sporting desire to “larn” the Austrians even as the Germans had been “larned.” And then Earnshaw spoke the words that were afterwards to be most often in Skene's ears. He had bought some land in Nairobi. Skene did not know where it was. “It's where you're still let alone,” said Earnshaw.

At eleven next morning Skene was riding, as he had ridden more than three years before, with the same companion, towards that gravelly ridge, to north of which lay the railhead town whence he had first detrained, on coming out to France. The battle of 1918 had washed right up to the south of the ridge. The trees were gone, the land

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still covered with the rank waste to which the crops had run. They crossed a road. On a new English signboard were the names Calais and Courtrai. Earnshaw stopped and turned to the left. Skene recognized the familiar road and looked for the old red-brick tower above the thatched roof. There were buildings, but the shape was strange. Something jibbed in Skene's heart. Did he want to go, or not? Was he curious—angry—what? After all, it was he who had broken off the connection—for what? For a matter of taste!

Earnshaw was saying: "Come on, they'll give us a drink!"

Perhaps she wasn't there.

A "five-nine" must have hit the top of the old short tower, and the delicate fuse, bursting the charge at once, had only flung down some cubic feet of the solid old brickwork. A smaller field-howitzer shell had dropped vertically through the great ridge of the thatched roof. The wall flowers were dead, and the dirt and neglect that trailed wherever battle had been, hung as the smuts hang after snow. But most of all Skene missed the rough bark of the old half-blind

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watch-dog, who used to drag his chain like a lost spirit, at fall of foot or hoof.

They tied their horses by the bridge, and walked over the dented cobbles, among neat stacks of wire and pickets, harvest of many trenches, toward the shutterless kitchen windows blocked with army canvas. Something like an uneasy ghost in dark clothes shuffled along the cobbles by the wall. Yes, yes—old Vanderlynden! “Good morning, patron, how goes it?” But the old bowed figure only shuffled on, and passed out of sight round the corner of the house.

“The old boy seems to have forgotten us,” said Earnshaw.

“You know what happened to him!”

“Walked straight into the Bosche, going to rescue his married daughter’s goods, but he must have got back weeks ago!”

He was evidently not moved by what, to Skene, was one of the most pathetic stories of the War.

“Good morning, Mam’selle.”

Skene looked up. There stood Madeleine, framed in the dark doorway. . . .

The pallor he had found so charming was gone.

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She was browned and reddened by hard work. The great bunch of dark hair was more closely and simply done—her nondescript blouse rolled to the elbows, her dark skirt looped up. Her boots, alone, on the cobbles, had that sort of solid elegance he had first noticed, distinguishing her from her kind, the unæsthetic elegance of one who always chose the best, because it gave her more for the money! Earnshaw spoke again.

“Good morning, Mam’selle, how’s the patron!”

“As he always is, now, since the Bosche took him prisoner!”

“You remember my friend?”

“Certainly I remember!” She did not even turn her head. “Enter then, and have some coffee. We have no wine, your troops stole it all!”

In the half-dismantled, war-worn kitchen, Skene surveyed her filling the cups. She still moved with the grace of limbs toughened and stretched with hard work, and of healthy nerves working like well-oiled machinery.

Her voice was harder, her expression more severe—trouble, no doubt, and the responsibility of the farm! When she had finished an argu-

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ment with Earnshaw on the price of eggs, she turned to Skene as though divining his thoughts.

"You know, I lost my fiancé after all!"

Skene replied:

"I am sorry!" She leaned on the table, musing.

"What a horror of a war, all the same!"

"Well, it's finished now!"

That seemed to excite her. She raised her voice: "Yes—it was time. There's my brother Marcel dead now, the other was killed at the beginning. My father going about like a lost dog. Out of fifty hectares, ten or more are flooded—on the remainder there are tons of wire and filth. No labour, no tools or horses—what the Bosche didn't destroy, the Allies stole. . . ."

Skene gazed. Was any other motive behind that unaccustomed vehemence? The final loss of D'Archeville—irritation against Skene himself? Such vindictiveness in one so self-contained, so ready to forget her troubles in any passing entertainment! . . .

"—and we can get no labour, and now every one is going away, to leave us to it . . . and they

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have not started paying us our reparations that are due to us from the Bosche—and no one cares——”

She folded her arms and stared out of the doorway at the grey and sodden landscape:

“But we shall do it. Everything will be put right; we will see ourselves paid, to the last half-penny!”

Earnshaw was getting fidgety under this tirade of which he understood perhaps a sixth. He got up and made a remark in English. She did not reply.

“Come on!” he said, and moved out into the yard to unhitch his horse.

Skene followed. Madeleine was standing there and staring, obstinate, intractable. Whatever she was looking for, it was nothing from him. He was forgotten. Whatever had once made her give herself up to him, had vanished as though it had never been. And this was right! She and he alike were part of a former phase, of a time already history, and long-past history at that!

Mounting his narrow hairless veteran of a horse, he looked back; she was turning from the doorway, without a word or sign. But she was

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to haunt him many a year—symbolic of post-war France—a woman still young, pushing aside even her attractiveness, to toil and bargain ruthlessly—a woman widowed and childless, wrestling with Fate for the uttermost sou of compensation due to her.

CHAPTER XXVI

The End of a Perfect Day

THEY had said nothing at parting, except: "So long, old man!" "Good luck!" Through the glassless window of his railway carriage, Skene saw Earnshaw leading away the spare horse, solid, unreflecting, absorbed in the matter in hand. And with him real England seemed to turn its back and go on to something else.

Thus he came to Dunkirk, to that grey Flemish town, last outpost in the marshes open to the North Sea and its mists. He hadn't been in the place since he had gone buying white shifts for patrols going out in the snow of 1916. Then it had seemed civilization itself, now just a dingy obstacle to freedom.

He enquired for Uncle. It took him all the afternoon. By accident he heard that he was in that Canadian hospital on the dunes where hundreds lay, stricken by influenza, while they waited for the boat to take them home.

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Of that pestilence some said one thing, some another. Skene wondered if the real cause were not the sudden slump in the vitality of men, who, strung up to war for years, and suddenly hurled into peace, stood, as it were, beside themselves, searching in vain for the men they had once been.

The doctors attributed Uncle's collapse to his having gone ten hours without whisky. He was sinking when Skene arrived and did not recognize him. Skene stood there until the hard, free, good-humoured old spirit had passed; and was told: "We must clear up, you know, heaps more waiting! Funeral in the morning!" Skene shuddered, and passed out of the tent, and as he went a bugle rang out in that call—the first he had ever heard in France:

"Sixty-four—ninety-four,
He'll never go sick no more,
The poor beggar's dead."

The great demobilization camp with its thousands of men and hundreds of officers lay at the greyest depth of the Marsh, separated by sand hills only from the sea. It had all the marks of emergency like everything else in the War. There was the atmosphere that hangs about great

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docks after the launch of a ship, or street decorations after a procession. Gleaming arc lights on telegraph poles shone green on the multitudes being shifted hither and thither, sorted, registered, docketed, housed, fed and prepared for the boat and freedom on the morrow. Skene found his way to an officer to whom he had provided himself with an introduction. He knew too much to get mixed up with the unfortunate mob that went through the official treadmill. His new friend, a limping, infantry major, greeted him kindly and enquired about the corps. "We'll get out of this, if you'll wait for me a moment!"

Skene waited, and they caught a tram back into the town to a noisy restaurant, full of officers celebrating night after night the morrow they had been longing for during anything up to four years; full of Frenchmen and Belgians, greeting, laughing, drinking, or in low tones, at little side tables, reckoning up the loss of properties, and landmarks, the break up of families, and industries, and forming plans for the future.

"We're better here!" he was told. "Our camp is rotten with 'flu, the fellers are going sick in shoals. Have some of this Château Yquem, it's

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the last of the real stuff and there'll never be any more, they say!"

They returned early to the camp; and Skene, philosophic with food and drink, walked up and down to finish his pipe, in the muggy darkness of the Flemish winter night.

From the N.C.O.'s mess, a gramophone was roaring out a tune. It was an old worn record, one of the songs of recruiting days ground out on a powerful new machine.

"For we don't want to lose you,
But we think you ought to go,
For your King and your Country,
They both need you so!"

"Cut it out!" came a thick voice, "it's worn out! Any road, I'm sick of it!" The tune stopped with a jerk.

Skene moved quickly away. That music-hall tune had rung through every parish hall in England, in the great days when the New Armies were enlisting and training by the hundred thousand. What hurt was the truth of the remark. Worn out—the emotion that it recorded. He was sick of it; every one was sick of it. A new

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record now was spinning out its song: "When you come to the end of a perfect day."

Skene went to bed, for the last time in that atmosphere of disinfectant, brazier-smoke, mules and tarpaulin.

Next morning dawned with the muggy cold and wet that reaches its perfection in Dunkirk. It was the third anniversary of Skene's first attack of trench fever and a fine ripe rheumatism gripped his bones. He managed to avoid being picked for duty, and made his way down to the quay.

He left the street through which was already flowing the long dun-coloured river of English soldiery, with its good humour, and invincible school-treat unmilitariness; and came suddenly on a commotion to which Babel must have been child's play.

A broad quay ran before one of the old Napoleonic barracks, and all about it men were swarming, in French, German, Austrian, Italian, Serbian, Russian and who knows what other uniforms, parts of uniforms, civilian suits with military cap or pair of field boots. Blue, blue-grey, slate-grey, grey-green, grass-green, ivy-green, with flat, peaked, feathered or merely shapeless head-gear—one in a thing like a lady's muff—

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one in a bowler—sweating and stinking, talking in tongues of all races, they were eddying, forming and breaking around banners, interpreters, and gendarmes.

It was one of the great clearing houses set up by the French to collect and redistribute to their homes the masses of prisoners—allied prisoners, enemy prisoners, interned of all nations, Flemish civilians who had been haled away for who knows what forgotten and defeated purpose, to some strange place within the cordon of the German trenches—Russians from Siberia, captured in some great Galician or Caucasian drive—every type of German-speaking male—from Tyrolese to Hamburger—all mixed up with men of appearance and speech indistinguishable from Skene's own—who might have come—and probably did—from London, Glasgow or New York.

Leaning on a stone coping, Skene gazed and discussed the scene with one of those disillusioned, well-educated middle-aged corporals that could exist in no army but the French, and who summed it all up thus:

"One would almost say that the Devil had mixed all these poor souls expressly for the pleasure of seeing us comb them out again! This pot-

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pourri of races and tongues is the remnant escaped—and has had the good luck to preserve life, without home or family, existing like beasts for years. What have they learned? Nothing, my lieutenant, give them rifles and rum, a flag to follow and a master to drive, and they would start another war to-morrow!”

Skene delighted him with a present of English cigarettes, and left him explaining the difference between a Pole and a Jugo-Slav.

The homeward-bound boat was getting up steam. Skene made his way on to the upper deck. And when she slid out of the narrow bottle-necked harbour, past the destroyers tied up to the shell-and-bomb battered quays, he turned his back on the low shore, that rose from the Belgian sandhills where the Bosche guns used to stand, towards the downs which made a shadow on the sky-line beyond Calais. He did not want to look at it just then.

Below, on the main deck, the men were singing to a well-known hymn tune the doggerel:

“When I get my civvy suit on,
Oh, how happy I shall be.”

“Good-bye B.E.F.,” muttered Skene.

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England hove grey-white out of the mists to meet him—a tender parent no doubt, but occupied for the moment with other things. It hurt him afresh to see those scraps of the victorious army disembark, without a cheer, without a sign—the lucky percentage of the New Armies—the biggest, most hastily gathered body of volunteers that had ever flocked together.

Demobilization had already been going on some weeks—every one had seen too many of the crowds in those hurrying trains to feel enthusiasm. The War had outlasted all patience, and all interest, become a cosmic stupidity like bad weather or high rates.

Dispersal Station in England was even more breathless and hasty than Demobilization Camp in France. Hundreds poured through it daily—shed all but their bare uniform, and passed away into civil life. The great machine of five years was reversing, spilling out civilians as it turned. So, in the grey twilight of a winter afternoon, Skene in a first-class carriage made his last journey. He was “released”—with permission to wear uniform for twenty-eight days, would be given “Special Instructions” if he were required.

Homewards!

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But in his heart was a nasty qualm, a feeling that he was not really going home, that home lay behind him, in the rough-and-ready, meagre-hearted "mess"—even further, in some well-groomed graveyard on the Belgian frontier, where most of his friends and comrades lay.

The train paused at a wayside station. He saw in the dusk a half-finished munition works already abandoned—endless new sidings full of queer devices—very young soldiers on the platform.

The train moved on again, and he seemed to be moving too. The railway carriage faded round him into another and a wetter twilight—the twilight of a dawn in which he had been relieved in the front line by Mansfield. The cold of filthy water seemed rising round his knees. The everlasting crackle and swish of machine gun fire was soothing to his ears. The dawn showed bleary in the sky; he would have spoken to the ghost of Mansfield, but another voice spoke in his dream: "Medal! 'ow can they give a medal to the 'ole world—we'll just get a bit o' brass with 'I was there' on it!"—the voice of his servant, Jerry, speaking to Sergeant Strood. And Skene awoke, awoke to gathering shadows in a railway carriage. The draught was whistling

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round his knees, the train moved with a rattle and a swish.

But that dreaming moment had brought its comfort. He saw things in proportion. After all, four years and more of service and discipline, of risk and discomfort—that was something.

He had gone into the thing neither because he was paid, nor because he was forced—and that was something. Processions and speeches were empty show—even the eventual effect on Europe was irrelevant—but deep within himself he had fulfilled a need, worked out a destiny. In what an abyss of self-contempt would he now be sunk had he not gone to that War—he, fit and of age?

That was it—the call had come, and he had answered; surely he had his reward in: “I was there!”

THE END

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